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On Loving God Through Music

a sermon on Psalm 33

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The best gifts are those we most enjoy by giving them back. At first that might seem counter intuitive. The point of a gift is to enjoy it, so it would seem that the best gifts would come from those who know you well enough to give you just what you want. And if we were talking about the best gifts for Christmas or a birthday, might be true. But I am talking about the best gifts period. I am convinced that the best gifts in life are never properly appreciated and enjoyed until they are given back. I have some examples.

Life itself is a gift. Life is a gift not from our parents, but from God. You exist because God made you. He sustains you. Apart from his gracious providence you would not draw your next breath. God wanted you to exist, and so you do. I always tell people, especially those in nursing homes, that life is a gift from God and full of blessings. Ironically, you never live life to the fullest until you give your life back to God. What does that mean? I believe we give our lives back to God in two different but mutually reinforcing ways.

First, we give our lives back to God by living for God. We accept his grace. We trust him. Therefore we live with faith, hope, and love. We spend the precious time he has given us serving God and others. That's the first way we give our lives back to him.

The second way is death. There comes a time for every one of us when we must give our life back to the God who made us. When that time comes, he gives us the grace to do so.

I said the two ways reinforce one another, and they do. The person who lives for God knows the truth of Jesus' words: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" [Jn 12.24]. He was speaking of his own death, but his point has wider relevance. By living for God you die daily to self. The beginning of the Christian life is baptism, which symbolizes dying to the old and rising to new life. If you live each day dependent on God's grace, you will find it easier to trust him when the time comes to die. And you will know that death is not the end. Resurrection awaits those who belong to Christ. God gives us this life. We give it back to him by living for him, and he gives himself to us and makes life

abundant. At some point, we give our lives back to him when we die. Then he gives life back to us immortal, glorious, and beautiful.

Love is another precious gift best enjoyed by giving it back. Think of the love between a man and a woman. It is pitiful and tragic if it is not reciprocated. It is beautiful when it is. This too is a good gift from God to us, and we give it back to him by honoring him in our expression of it. That's what marriage is for. Within marriage, again, love is given and given back, both emotionally and physically.

Sometimes the result of this is children. They too are a gift from God. We give them back to God when we understand that they are not our property. They belong to God. We are caretakers. We must raise them to know and love God ... and to be strong and good. Notice by the way I said "good" not "nice." Niceness has its uses, but *good* is a much deeper word.

Friendship is yet another gift that we best enjoy by giving back. The reasons why are obvious to anyone who has a true friend.

By now you see what I am leading up to. A few of you look nervous. You might be fearful that I am going to suggest we give back the new instruments. Not quite. I am going to suggest we use them! Let's use them to give back to God one of the most beautiful gifts he has given us: music.

Music is a gift from God. God knew we would have feelings we could not express with words, so he gave us music. God knew we would need a universal language that could speak to the human soul across cultural barriers, so he gave us music. God created us to need more than food, water, and shelter. He created us with a need for beauty and expression. That is why every human culture that ever was or ever will be has had the arts. God gave us the gift of music because he wanted us to look beyond the gift to the One who gave it. He wanted us to know him, and music is a clue – a very big clue – that ought to make us suspicious that we have a good and wise Creator.

Peter Kreeft has offered an interesting argument for the existence of God. He wrote: "There is the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. Therefore there must be a God." He comments, "You either see this one or you don't" [*Handbook of Christian Apologetics*, p. 81]. I want you to consider his argument for a moment. Do you see it? When you hear elegant, powerful music that moves your soul, never mind your musical taste, do you perceive God's glory reflected in some small way? You should.

Think about it. Music did not have to exist. Granted the physical properties of the material universe are such that certain sound waves are created under certain conditions. For example, a child can take a blade of grass and blow through it to produce a hum. Two sticks hit together make a sound. Still, that's just sound. Sound is

not music until it finds rhythm and harmony. Just as the sounds that come out of our mouths are not language until they are put together in a certain way. And even then language is not only functional but can be beautiful. Music can be functional. Certain tribes in Africa communicated over distances with drums. Many instruments originated on the battlefield. Nevertheless, music is far more beautiful than functional. And when you hear the work of Bach, or any of many other composers, you reach a level of aesthetic excellence that can take your breath away.

My point is, music did not have to exist. We did not have to have sound. Even when God gave us sound, he did not have to give us music. Have you ever stopped to wonder why music is beautiful? It is because something inside us corresponds to something the nature of the universe. We are “wired” for music. We can discern musical patterns. We find it beautiful. We are “wired” both to enjoy music and to create it. Why is that? Christianity says, it is because we were created by a loving God who gave us music as a gift.

God created us to enjoy music, but before that, God created us to enjoy and glorify God. Music is a tool he has given us for that holy purpose. You were created to find joy in God. Knowing your Creator and giving him the praise he deserves fulfills you at the deepest core of your being. Because of sin, this is not as easy or as enjoyable as it ought to be; yet even sin cannot erase the need you have for God. It is too much a part of you. It can never be destroyed without destroying you. So you have this desire somewhere down deep to worship. It is like molten lava building up in a volcano. It must find expression. How? Music is one very important way. Music enhances our praise of God. We can praise God without music, in thoughts, feelings, and words. Through the visual arts or dance. But we human beings figured out very early on that God gave us music to make our worship better.

Psalms 33 calls us to joyful praise. It commands us to pick up instruments: the harp, the lyre—stringed instruments like a piano. It commands us to sing to God a new song. Why? Why this musical celebration? Why is our joy so great that words alone will not do? Why must we put our joy to music? God.

We sing our praises because God created everything that exists. “By the word of the Lord the heavens were made.” And ... *and*, because God saves. “He loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord.” The Lord looks down from heaven. He sees. He acts. He acts to establish peace, justice, and righteousness. Our hope is not in our own strength. “A king is not saved by his great army; a warrior is not delivered by his great strength.” God saves. God alone.

So God is Creator and Redeemer. The whole Bible lurks in the background behind this psalm, from creation in Genesis, to the cross and Resurrection of Jesus, to the end of the Revelation, when Christ returns to make all things new. That’s the story of the Bible.

That's the story of the world. That is the story we inhabit, in which we live, in which we have a part to play. And that is why God is worthy of our praise. That is why we need music – to make our praise beautiful.

And yet ... I fear our praise is never all that it ought to be. Even when our music reaches the highest levels of human excellence. Our hearts are still divided. Our motives are never wholly pure. Our love for God falls short of perfection, and it always will until he raises us from the dead and makes all things new. This is a problem, because we were created to love perfectly. We are never our truest selves until we do. That is where God's grace rescues us. He not only rescues us by giving us resurrection to eternal life. He not only restores our ability to love perfectly. He accepts our humble praise in the meantime. In fact, he delights in it.

If you look back at all the gifts I mentioned at the beginning of the sermon, you will see how much we need grace. We do not live as we ought, we need grace. We do not love one another as we ought – even when a woman and man are in love, they do not. They enjoy the giddy feelings, but those feelings do not last, and those feelings are not love anyway. Love is how you treat another person. Obviously we need grace, not only from God but from husband to wife and wife to husband. Between parents and children too. We need grace. Among friends ... within the church ... we need grace. Grace from God. Grace to and from one another.

Music is the same. God gave us the gift of music to bring joy to our lives. It does that. He also gave us music as a tool to praise him, for this too should bring us joy. It does. And yet our praise is acceptable to him because in his great mercy and grace he has chosen to accept it, for the sake of Christ, who died for us, and because he loves us.

Let me tell you one more thing, and then this braying donkey will be silent and let the music testify. If you ever find yourself moved deeply by music during worship – I once heard Handel's *Messiah* performed live with a symphony and a choir of 200. When they hit the "Hallelujah Chorus," you would have thought you had been lifted into heaven itself. But that's the thing. You haven't been. All you got was a sample, the tiniest foretaste. You ain't heard nothin' yet! Heaven resounds with the glorious praise of God, with music so beautiful you would literally die if you heard it right now. The music you hear now reminds you of what you have to look forward to. Best of all, by God's grace, our music, humble though it may be by the standards of the angelic hosts – our music unites us with the hosts of heaven in praise. Our voices join with theirs around the throne of God. And somehow, our humble music does not diminish but rather enhances the heavenly chorus. This too is grace. And for this reason we ought to play our instruments and raise our voices in praise to God, for he is worthy of our praise. We live – and we worship – by his grace. Amen.