

Paying more attention to Jesus' hymnbook in order to become more like Him

Pastor David C. Dixon

Introduction: The Psalms were Jesus' hymnbook, and He probably knew them all by heart! A great way for us to grow in Christlikeness is to get into the Psalms. They have much to teach us about Jesus.

- That's what He taught His disciples after the resurrection, according to Lk. 24:44, when He declared that He Himself is the object of all the Hebrew Scripture (our Old Testament): "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the *Law* of Moses and the *Prophets* and the *Psalms* must be fulfilled.' Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures."

- Those were the three divisions of the Hebrew Bible, which all spoke of Jesus. Wouldn't you like for Him to open your mind to understand the Scriptures? It's precisely what His Holy Spirit wants to do! The Psalms even have things to teach us about Jesus that are not in the Gospels.

1) British Bible commentator John Stott wrote, "Our Christianity is poor because our Christ is poor." In other words, if we don't have a deep scriptural perspective of Jesus, He will simply not be that great in our eyes, and we will live an impoverished version of Christianity. So what do we need to do to get out of this "poverty"?

- Hunger for His Word, which comes from a totally new heart – that's what the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel had foreseen that God would do someday. It's what David the psalmist was praying for when He asked God to create in him "a clean heart." Maybe you're thinking, "I already gave my heart to Christ. Don't I have a new heart?"

- At least you have the beginnings! But true spiritual growth is about the *continuing process* of getting a *bigger vision* of Jesus, because it's only through Him that we access the presence and power of God to shape our hearts so that we actually become more and more like Jesus. We don't access that presence and power apart from feeding on God's Word and intimacy with the Lord Jesus. So what's our problem? Why do we get stuck spiritually? And why aren't we growing more?

2) Martin Luther, the one whose rediscovery of God's Word we're celebrating this year on its 500th anniversary, analyzed our problem like this: "We will never break any of the commandments unless we begin by breaking the first one" (what was the first one? "No other gods before me..."). He recognized that **idolatry is the default mode** of the human heart, and it's **what I cannot save myself from**.

- The vicious cycle of our ego, always preoccupied with its own well-being, comfort and image, has no remedy except in the cross of Christ – why else would the Son of God have had to come to earth and die unless that was precisely the remedy we needed?! Yet so many people in our churches have never understood this, so they often don't hear the difference between the Gospel and "moralism," which appeals to your old nature to get you to do right; it's actually a way of avoiding God as Savior and Lord by trying to develop your own credentials to present to God (as if He owed you). It's reminiscent of the Pharisees as they tended to emphasize external aspects of the covenant – the religious markers that said you were "in," like Sabbath observance, circumcision, washings and other rituals from the Torah, temple offerings – instead of focusing on a renewed heart (Ps. 51:10). So the Jewish religious tradition was bankrupt by the time it got to Nicodemus, a sincere teacher of the law who couldn't understand anything about what Jesus said regarding the new birth (Jesus Himself was amazed).

- A lot of times in church we still appeal to the same kind of moralistic motivations to try to convince people to be good: "Don't lie because it will get you in trouble!" "Be good because that's what works out best for you." In other words, the motivation we often give people for changing their ways is the fear of negative consequences or the incentive of personal interests, essentially fomenting selfishness as the motivation for people to do what's right (maybe necessary sometimes in the education of children, but with adult believers?!). Exercising this kind of external pressure on the will may provoke temporary changes of behavior, but it leaves the heart governed by egotism and insecurity.

- The Gospel, on the other hand, focuses on **Jesus as your Deliverer** and true Ruler, true answer to your hardest questions, the real comforter for your deepest longings, the foundation of your being, the touchstone of life. In other words, the Gospel should help us see **our impotence to overcome the natural idolatry** of our heart and move us to cry out to God for help (our first real prayer of faith!), because Christianity is not about learning how to look good, but about a new heart that wants to be under Jesus' rule. So the Gospel's way of promoting a change of behavior appeals to the spiritual memory of Jesus (you see why it's **so important to have a clear picture of Him!**). It's in Jesus that God has fully revealed how He accepts and loves us freely (in spite of how undeserving we are). That's what gives us a new inner motivation of joy and gratitude so that we want to obey and please Him from the heart.

3) Back in His day, people didn't follow Jesus only because of his miracles – they also followed Him because of how impressive He was in responding to all of life's deep issues (physical, spiritual, political and religious issues). He had the answers – in fact, He Himself WAS the Answer!

- One clear illustration of this was the way He handled Scripture (the Old Testament) – with authority and clarity like people had never heard! He could answer every question His opponents brought up. He could deal with every difficulty, every storm, every circumstance. (Can Jesus still do that today? Put Him to the test!). He was so knowledgeable and wise, but He sometimes used "round-about expressions" to call people's attention to this reality ("One greater than the temple is here"; "One greater than Solomon is here" – Mt.12:6, 42). He was

the greatest Old Testament scholar of all time – He knew thoroughly the Word that His Spirit had inspired and He understood its true application.

- Did you ever wonder which books of the Old Testament Jesus quoted most often? The top four OT books He quoted most (at least according to what we have in the Gospels) include the following: #4, **Exodus** (7 times), especially referencing the ten commandments; #3, **Isaiah** (8 times), sometimes describing the disconnect between Israel and their God, other times reminding people about the comfort God would bring them through Him; #2, **Deuteronomy** (10 times), responding to the tempter and reinforcing the commandments; #1, **Psalms** (11 times), especially **clarifying His identity**.

- Psalms is the most-read book of the Bible, and it's the one Jesus quotes most often. Do you want to get to know Jesus and become more like Him? Get into the Psalms! This is what we will do in my next few times at preaching, looking at all the passages where Jesus quotes the Psalms. When Jesus had difficult discussions with the Jews, He normally confronted them with the truth about who He was by using the Psalms.

A) In John 6, Jesus had fed the 5,000 with 5 loaves and 2 fish, and the crowd was so impressed that they came clamoring to Him for more the next day. But Jesus knew they were only interested in their stomachs (He knows our hearts AND our stomachs!). Do we ever come to the Lord that way?

- These people were NOT really interested in Jesus' ruling their hearts, or His Kingdom coming in the world, but just wanted Him to satisfy their agenda. Can we identify? Often we just want Him to relieve our pain or grant our wish, when **what He wants is to transform our hearts!**

- So that's what's going on in this scene: the Jews were challenging Jesus to prove He was as great as Moses: "Do some miraculous sign so we can see it and believe you. Prove you're as good as Moses who gave us the manna in the wilderness." They're not just remembering the Exodus story, because when they say "it is written" (Jn. 6:31), they quote Psalm 78, which they sang in synagogue: "he commanded the skies above and opened the doors of heaven, and he rained down on them manna to eat and gave them the bread of heaven. Man ate of the bread of angels" (Ps. 78:24-25).

- But Jesus interprets the passage for them more accurately as He assures them it's not Moses, but His Father who gives them the true "bread from heaven." Then He makes a huge claim: "I am the **Bread of life**... I am the Bread that came down from heaven" (Jn. 6:35, 51). But His hearers couldn't bear the idea of "eating Jesus as bread" – sounded like cannibalism! So how do we access this bread? How do we nourish our souls on Jesus? It's not about the bread and cup of the Lord's Supper, but about the intimate communion He offers us with Himself through His Spirit, thanks to His self-sacrifice on our behalf.

B) A few chapters later in Jn. 10, Jesus has another discussion with the Jews about His identity, and His bold statement, "The Father and I are one," draws strong criticism. The Jews want to stone Him for blasphemy because **He's claiming to be God**.

- So Jesus quotes from Ps. 82:6: "Is it not written in your Law, 'I have said you are gods'? If he called them 'gods' to whom the word of God came – and the Scriptures cannot be broken

– what about the one whom the Father set apart as his very own and sent into the world?” How much more so that One deserves to be called “God”!

- This is why John’s first letter includes this bold assertion: “No one who denies the Son has the Father. Whoever confesses the Son has the Father also” (1 Jn. 2:22). They are inseparable. The Son is our access to the Father, because Jesus was God Himself in the flesh! We need to confess Him daily as Lord!

C) At Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Mt. 21:16), everybody was singing and dancing in the streets, putting their cloaks and palm branches on the ground in front of the Man riding on the donkey as if He were a King!

- The Passover pilgrimage always had a festive air about it, but this year was like no previous celebration, with everyone shouting, “Hosanna to the **Son of David**, Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord, Hosanna in the highest.” The children got so caught up in this spirit that they kept shouting these praises to the **Messiah** when they came into the temple.

- The chief priests and teachers of the law were indignant, so they called on Jesus to rebuke the overly exuberant children. But Jesus is not intimidated by the temple authorities! He quotes to them from Ps. 8:2, clearly accepting the children’s praise and acknowledgment of who He is: “from the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise.” This is the same Psalm that talks about the **son of man** being made a little lower than the angels, being crowned with glory and honor, being made ruler over the works of God’s hands, with everything put under his feet. In the beginning mankind was supposed to rule over the earth like this, but we gave up that calling in the Garden of Eden. So God had to send His Son as one of us to restore the rulership to where it belonged. So Psalm 8 definitely has big messianic implications, and the temple rulers knew it.

- The innocent children spoke truth with no selfish interest or political motivation, no ulterior motives of any kind. So their praises had the power to silence the foe (those priests and teachers were left speechless). In Christ we can become “pure in heart” like those little children who praised Jesus so unashamed; in fact, it’s the only way to enter the Kingdom of heaven.

D) In Mt. 22:44 (Mk. 12:35-37, Lk 20:42–43), after Jesus had answered multiple questions from the Pharisees, all designed to try to trap Him in His words, Jesus turned the tables on them, giving them some of their own medicine.

- He asked them a simple question and once more invoked the authority of the Psalms for the answer. Even though the question was childlike in both simplicity and profundity, the Pharisees had obviously not given the matter enough thought. Jesus asked them, “What do you think of the Christ? Whose son is He?” Everybody knew this answer, so they quickly blurted out “Son of David,” unaware they were stepping into His trap. Since everybody knew that answer, no one bothered to study the matter further (“pat answers” never go deep enough!).

- Jesus then took them to Ps. 110, where “The LORD [in Hebrew, Yahweh] said to my Lord [Adonai], Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.” The

teachers of the law assumed correctly that **Adonai** (“my Lord”) was a reference to Messiah, so Jesus asks how David could refer to his son as his Lord. The Pharisees were dumbfounded; they had no idea how to respond; it had never occurred to them to go deeper in this Psalm!

- Yet if they had, it would’ve carried them to the edge of unfathomable wonder: **the incarnation of God**, which gave rise to all the paradoxes of the Gospel, like the Passover Lamb who’s also our Good Shepherd (Rev. 7:17), the Root of David who’s also His offspring (Rev. 22:16), the High Priest who presents Himself as the sacrificial offering (Heb. 7:27), etc.
- The Psalms were already pointing ahead to this deeper spiritual dimension of the Messiah’s identity, but only Jesus Himself could bring it out – the perfect Interpreter and Fulfillment of Scripture. In the same way, He wants to open your mind to the Scriptures so that you can get to know Him more deeply! Will you hunger for it?!