

# Gravity and Gladness on Sunday Morning - Lesson 4b

by John Piper

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*The sermon explores the tension between fine and folk culture in worship, highlighting their intrinsic vulnerabilities and positive potentials.*

**Duration:** 27:10

**Scripture:** John 4:24, Romans 12:1, 1 Corinthians 10:31, Colossians 3:17, 1 Timothy 4:13, Hebrews 10:24-25, James 1:22

**Topics:** "Worship Culture", "Hearing God"

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## Description

In this sermon, Pastor John Piper discusses the topic of worship and culture. He emphasizes the importance of being mindful of how we hear the word of God and encourages the congregation to seek a deep and profound satisfaction in God. He also mentions a chapter in his book, 'A Godward Life Book 2,' titled 'Take Heed How You Hear,' which he recommends reading. Additionally, he briefly touches on the tension between fine and folk in worship, and how the mingling of historic and contemporary elements can enhance our worship experience.

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## Transcript

The following message is by Pastor John Piper. More information from Desiring God Ministries is available at [www.desiringgod.org](http://www.desiringgod.org). Okay, 20 minutes, and way more than we can do in 20 minutes. Let me just think here, what would be the most helpful thing to do in these 20 minutes, because we're not going to get through these.

I'm going to leave off number 7. Number 7 is a chapter in Godward Life, Book 2. All I did was photocopy the chapter and put it on overhead. So go there and find it. It's in Godward Life, Book 2. The title is Take Heed How You Hear.

I think it's number 111, if I remember correctly. So chapter 111 in Godward Life is number 7. You can just read it. An Effort to Capture Our Worship and Music Ethos is a letter that I wrote to a candidate for worship leader 2 or 3 years ago, 3 years ago I guess now, that simply is an effort to sum up the kinds of things we're talking about.

So I'm inclined to think we should probably spend the rest of our time on number 5 and talk about this tension between fine and folk. What I'm really doing here in number 5 is taking number 11 here, the

mingling of historic and contemporary, and unpacking it more fully. So that's my sense of what would be most helpful to do.

So here we go. Fine and folk in thoughts on worship and culture. The New Testament is very open-ended on cultural forms.

This is review. I don't think I need to say any more about that. So let's just skip number 1, go to number 2. Culture falls on a continuum between folk and fine.

One way to describe the differences in how people approach worship is to speak in terms of fine culture and folk culture. By culture I mean a pattern of life including thought and emotion and speech and activity. By fine culture I have in mind the pattern of life that puts a high priority on intellectual and artistic expressions that require an extraordinary ability to produce and often demand disciplined efforts to understand and appreciate.

By folk culture I have in mind a pattern of life that puts a high priority on expressions of the heart and mind that please and help average people without demanding unusual effort. For example, it's the difference between classical music and bluegrass, or easy listening, or rock, or show tunes, or oldies, or country western. Any of those I would put in the category of folk.

And classical music of various kinds, and there's all kinds, and not all of them are good. Don't equate classical with good. There's evil classical music, I think.

Unhelpful classical music. Godless classical music, probably. And some of us think, well, if it's classical, it's good to listen to.

And that's probably not the case. Well, I'm not a musical expert, but I listen to public radio more than anything else. And there are two public radio stations.

There's the news station, then there's down just below KTIS there's the classical station. And I listen to that, and I try to figure it out sometimes, and sometimes it doesn't seem to go anywhere. And I say, what kind of world view is coming through there? It doesn't, so it feels to me, it comes across to me, no better than a rock band.

And I say, you know, this rock band is just kindling emotions that are ungodly, or reflecting a kind of disorder in the universe that I don't have in my heart about God who created the world. I get the same feel for some classical stuff. This is kind of a disordered, it's not going anywhere.

It's not saying anything clear about reality. The spirit of life that's coming through it is not my spirit of life as I relate to God. Then another illustration just might be that there are certain perhaps triumphalistic, sweeping statements that were born out of very nationalistic, ethnocentric moments in Russia's life, say, that might not be holy at all in their origin or in what they perpetuate, but might create kind of a can-do, put-you-down kind of feeling as the music soars, rather than anything great about God or about life.

It's just not automatic. That's all I want to say. I don't have any composers that I think are all wrong or all evil.

I just want you to be aware that there is popular folk-type music that can be very helpful, and there is some classical music that can be very unhelpful, and the roles can switch. Another example would be the

contrast between Shakespearean drama, which I would not put in the category primarily of folk today anyway, at the Guthrie and *The Empire Strikes Back*, or *Return of the Jedi*, or whatever the new one is. That's populist to the core and appeals to all kinds of simple, easy emotions that everybody has when they see things blowing up or see interesting little tricks of the camera.

Whereas you have to work to understand Hamlet. What in the world are these long speeches and the convoluted English grammar? Shakespeare was an absolute master, but to be a master means he's hard to understand, which means it's not popular, which means it's fine and not folk. Now, I'm not passing any judgments yet, because what I'm going to do in this is show what's good and bad about both of these.

Another example, one might think of the difference between reading Gerard Manley Hopkins' poem, *The Wind Over, To Christ Our Lord*, which says, I caught this morning's minion, kingdom of daylights, dolphin, dawn-drawn, falcon, in his riding of the rolling level underneath him, steady air and striding high there, how he rung upon the reign of a whipling wing. Huh? We studied that poem for days when I was in college. Or I grew up on Edgar Guest with my father.

It takes a heap of living to make a house a home. You know, there's a difference between those two kinds of poetry. One is folk poetry and one is fine poetry.

So what's the place of these two things in worship? We should not pass judgment on fine culture or folk culture per se. There are caricatures and the excesses in both are easy to condemn. That's not our purpose.

It's more profitable to consider the strengths and weaknesses built into both of them so as to avoid the weaknesses and affirm the strengths in both. Fine culture and folk culture have intrinsic vulnerabilities to sin and unique potentialities for God-glorifying goodness. They are redeemable.

So here's my effort to talk about the intrinsic vulnerabilities first of fine. Then we'll talk about the vulnerabilities of folk. Then we'll talk about the potentials of fine.

Then we'll talk about the potentials of folk and then we'll be done. Intrinsic vulnerabilities of fine culture include elitism and snobbishness. In demanding high levels of intellect and skill, it easily inflates the ego of those who succeed in it and tempts them to look with contempt on folk culture with its simpler achievements.

It easily isolates technical expertise from the larger issues of life and attempts to give it intrinsic value instead of defining its value in relation to other, more important, spiritual and personal realities. It's inevitably less accessible to the average person and therefore tends toward performance rather than participation. And this performance orientation carries, again, the tendency toward an atmosphere of aloofness and distance.

Let me give you an example of what I mean by this relation to other, more important, spiritual and personal realities. If you said, should you strive for excellence on Sunday evening worship service or Wednesday night worship service in the quality of the songs sung and the way they're sung? Should you strive for excellence there in that service? I would say yes. And also strive for excellence in forgiveness when she misses the note or he misses the note, either on the piano or the singing.

In other words, in the service as a soloist is singing or like last Wednesday night, there was the refrain back and forth between the leader and the worship congregation. Not only do you want that to work so

nothing is distracted, but if it doesn't work on one particular line where you get bobbled, is there the excellence of forgiveness in the congregation? That excellence is as important as the singing excellence. Oh, how we need that in a downtown church because in a downtown church, you get a lot of walk ons of people who are offensive.

They don't smell the same. They may just get up and walk circles around the sanctuary while you're preaching because they're mentally ill. Now, that's distracting, but there's something worse.

Hatred, anger, that's worse. A people who don't have any sympathy, who don't have any compassion, that's worse. And that's the kind of excellence you want to stir in with the excellence of all other fine things.

Now, here's some intrinsic vulnerabilities of folk culture. Intrinsic vulnerabilities of folk culture include a laziness and carelessness. There is an intrinsic drift toward increasing indifference to simple disciplines that define excellence at those rudimentary levels.

For example, using bad grammar in worship songs like you raineth. You raineth. It's either thou rainest or you rain.

It isn't you, modern word, raineth, old word. You can't mix those two things. And you say, well, yeah, you can.

They do it. Well, it's a very great stumbling block to me. Or having you and thou in the same song.

Thou, O Lord, art a shield about me. What's the next line? You're my glory. Well, get it straight.

Which is it? Is it you, O Lord, art a shield about me? You're my glory. Or is it thou, O Lord, art a shield about me? Thou. Stay with thou or stay with you.

Don't go back and forth between thou and you. And you know why that exists? Pure laziness. Somebody in a spiritual swoon was at a piano or with a guitar and a song came to them.

And they wrote it down. And those are the words that came to them. And then there was no discipline to refine it.

Re-fine it. And it doesn't become a refined song when you just straighten up your pronouns a little bit. So I'm saying one of the vulnerabilities of folk culture is just pure laziness.

Thinking that the first thing that comes into your mind is inspiration from God. Well, no good poetry has ever been written that way. I mean, you read the poetry of most worship songs and it just can't even stand it.

There's no meter that's similar. There's no rhyme scheme that's similar. You can tell very little effort has gone into making this a piece of art.

It's just up there. It just came to my mind that I put it out there. Those are not going to last.

They're just going to be here today, gone tomorrow. And I don't think in order to be genuinely folk, you have to be lazy and lousy. I think there is good folk stuff.

This is not like the word ain't in You Ain't Nothin' But a Hound Dog. It's like singing Thou Ain't Nothin' But a Hound Dog. You Ain't Nothin' But a Hound Dog is good country western music.

But Thou Ain't Nothin' But a Hound Dog is ridiculous. That's Elvis Presley. Folk culture, with its intrinsic anti-intellectualism, tends to short-circuit the mind and move the emotions with shortcuts.

Thus, folk culture is not generally a preservative force for great biblical doctrine. Now, this really begins to hit home. I've had some people point out, they say, Now, John, your worship services kind of move toward the folk end.

At least some Sundays they do. And yet, your preaching is pretty weighty with doctrine. Do you think you're cultivating a people and an ethos where those two things serve each other well? And that's a very good question.

Because I think there is a kind of music that is so simple and so folky that it probably won't function as a very good long-term preservative force for great biblical doctrine. Whereas there's a certain quality of hymnody, like Be Still My Soul that we sang at the funeral yesterday, that captures truth that would be harder for certain tunes to carry. You work on that yourself.

I just have a feeling that there's a certain kind of music that will carry weightier things and thus preserve them over the long run. And a certain kind of music that won't. Now, that doesn't mean the kind of music is evil.

Because there are simple truths about God that we need simple tunes to get across. Real simple tunes. I'm so thankful for the simple chorus, Alleluia.

Alleluia, Alleluia. You sing it eight times. That's all it is.

Praise you. Praise you. Praise God.

Because that can come at the end of a weighty, substantial moment in worship where the people need a release, not with more content. Oh, spare me. I've just been, you know, I've got this huge, massive vision of God.

And I just need some simple release to say back to God that he's glorious. And so I really believe in simple worship songs. If you use them, not as a substitute for substance, but as those points in a service where you need that kind of expression.

Six, there are positive potentials of fine culture. The positive potentials of fine culture include the preservation of what we might call the life of the mind. Fine culture is more likely than folk culture to inject into the stream of society the commitment to think hard and think clearly.

It's more likely than folk culture to keep the intellect from atrophying. It is especially crucial that Christians not surrender the life of the mind to the secular world. First, because it belongs to God.

And he commanded us to love him with our minds. And second, because we will lose succeeding generations if we do not have intellectually credible expressions of faith to pass on to them. So one of the great strengths of fine culture is that is tailor made to sustain, encourage, strengthen and carry the more earnest efforts of the of the life of the mind.

Further, fine culture has the potential of preserving the very concept of truth and excellence and beauty as objective ideals rooted in God as our absolute. Folk culture tends always to exalt what works. That's why it's folk.

It's popular. It works. It is intrinsically pragmatic and colloquial and does not measure its achievements in terms of objective, absolute ideals, but generally in terms of wide appeal and practical effect.

No song gets to the top 40 because it's subduing itself to some objective ideal of truth. It gets there because it pleases the ear of the culture and therefore it's vulnerable. Whereas fine culture generally says, well, this probably won't be popular, but it's good.

And that's good to have some kind of somebody making efforts in music and in poetry and in preaching and in other corporate acts that. Pay allegiance to objective standards, not just appeal to the audience. Fine culture tends to march to the beat of a drummer other than mass appeal or practical effect.

At its best, it strives to create images of excellence and beauty and truth that echo more faithfully the ultimate excellency of God. Fine culture thus has the potential, if not contemporary success, of helping preserve the real complexities of truth and thus guarding against the intrinsic tendency of folk culture toward oversimplification and eventual distortion. Fine culture has the potential of touching some emotions that folk culture will not touch.

Folk culture tends toward what can be commonly shared and therefore minimizes what is rare. However, some emotions that belong to God are rare and profound and may be awakened and carried best through the expressions of fine culture. For example, there are probably some senses of grandeur that find preservation and expression best in some grand, magnificent, artistic statements that are not part of folk culture.

What's the most obvious example at Christmas? Exactly. That's the function of Handel's Messiah in our culture. It's almost popular because it's so profoundly good.

It's almost popular. People will go every year by the zillions to the St. Paul's Cathedral or the Good Orchestra Hall to hear this incredibly fine and yet profound because there is one place. I mean, there are many places.

I mean, Handel, this is about as close to being inspired as you can get. He wrote this thing in 29 days. And the place where I am moved the most, if it's done right, is where this worthy is the lamb comes in.

There's a silence and then suddenly. And that that first word is the lamb is a transporting moment. God word that if you know it, especially if you know it's being done by godly people, which is usually not can really be an act and moment of worship that no bluegrass, no rock, no contemporary worship song will ever come close to that emotion.

And God should have that emotion. He should have that emotion. And so we shouldn't write it off as saying, well, it's just elite.

Only a few people can do that. Well, that's true. But there's a place for that.

I don't think we should do Handel every Sunday morning. But sometime. And then the last thing is the positives of the folk culture.

And I know our times are up, but let's let's read at the end. If you have to run, run. But this will take three more minutes.

Maybe there are positive potentials of folk culture. The positive potentials of folk culture include meeting people where they are in order to communicate. Folk culture affirms the importance of building bridges of shareable experience.

It is a go tell mentality rather than a come see mentality. It goes the extra mile to make its vision accessible to the average person. Folk culture keeps the truth clear that elite groups of intellectuals and artists that look with contempt on the common man and his need and tastes are not admirable persons, no matter how accomplished their talents.

It's not admirable, admirable to hold popular things in contempt. Folk culture has the potential of reminding us that God must have loved the common people because he made so many of them. That's a quote from Abraham Lincoln.

Folk culture is by nature incarnational. It clothes its claims with the skin of ordinary people and affirms implicitly the value of getting through to the mind and the heart of the masses. Folk culture at its best has the potential of touching emotions that fine culture will not generally touch.

Thus, folk culture honors the preciousness of average wonders. Falling in love, taking a walk, eating a good meal, talking to a friend, swimming in the ocean, having a baby, planting a garden. All these are likely to be the subject of folk culture, creations and communications.

It helps us not neglect ordinary beauty. You can be so refined that you never connect with the ordinary, which I don't think is what the incarnation is all about. Jesus took on human flesh.

He was a carpenter. He taught in words people understand. He told parables about lilies and birds and worms and other things.

And and yet he was transfigured. All we do on this continuum, all we do is on this continuum between folk and fine. We should take strengths and weaknesses of both into account in our planning.

This will be an ongoing process, not a once for all discovery. So in other words, every church is in process here. Bethlehem is in process.

Your church is in process. You'll never arrive at the final perfect balance of folk and fine, contemporary and historic. It's always a sense of Lord guide us now.

It's a new day here. There are new truths that we've discovered. How can we bring together this and what's our calling? Well, we're out of time.

We'll get all of this stuff into a little booklet. And so in months to come, if you wish you had copies of these things, we'll just make sure they're they're available. But let's pray.

Father in heaven. Tomorrow morning. It comes.

Indeed, we should eat pizza and drink Pepsi to the glory of God. Prepare sermons this afternoon to the glory of God. Walk on through the rest of this day keenly aware that you are God.

We can't do anything without you. So I pray that there would be in all of our hearts now a deep, profound satisfaction in you and that all this thinking that we've done about the corporate life of our church in worship would be filtered through you and your word and brought to bear upon us and our churches in a

way that would magnify you the most and bless your people. In Jesus name, I pray.

Amen. Thank you. Thank you for listening to this message by John Piper, pastor for preaching at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

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