

Completing Worship

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11-14-07

Introduction.

- A. As you hopefully remember from our Bible-study session on Sunday morning, we saw from Scripture that the process of song worship involves four main steps: a hymn, that hymn engaging the heart, and then the heart teaching and admonishing the congregation, as well as pleasing God. To this point of the meeting, we've spent quite a bit of time looking at both hymns that are suitable for worship and hearts that are suitable for worship. We need to make sure that both of these are in line with God's expectations.
- B. However, friends, we can be singing the best hymns in the world and have the best hearts in the world, but that doesn't necessarily mean that we are fully carrying out God's plan for worship. We aren't the only ones who are involved in our own worship, and if either God isn't hearing us for whatever reason, or the congregation isn't hearing us for whatever reason, the effect of our song is greatly diminished.
- C. We need, then, to pay some attention to our audience. We need to learn how to remove the barriers that exist between our praise and God, or between our teaching and the congregation. In God's case, the solution to the problem is up to us. In the case of the congregation, it may not be, but we need to know how to make the attempt regardless. This evening, then, let's look at what the Bible says about completing worship.

I. Completing Worship with God.

- A. This examination must begin by looking at worship problems we have with God. Obviously, these are not times when we need to straighten God out, but times when God's unchanging nature requires us to straighten ourselves out, when there is something that we're doing wrong that causes God to reject our worship.
- B. We see one of these possible worship problems defined in the words of Jesus in Matthew 15:8-9. The point is that if we are teaching as doctrine the commandments of men in the songs we sing, that renders our worship vain and worthless every time. It doesn't matter how sincere we are; it doesn't matter how joyful our hearts are. If we are singing hymns that are not teaching the truth, the best that can be said of us is what Paul said of his Jewish kinsmen in Romans 10. At best, we are people who have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. Paul knew that his similarly zealous but ignorant countrymen were separated from God by their lack of knowledge of the truth, and if we sing error, that will separate us from Him too.
- C. In a similar vein, if we teach the commandments of God but do not obey them ourselves, God isn't pleased with that either. This is a popular, if unspoken, misconception in the denominational world around us. They have an assembly-only mindset about what serving God is. They think that if they come to church once a week and really throw themselves into praising Him, that they have fulfilled their spiritual obligation. This way of thinking is why we sometimes see the most amazing disconnect between the lives of our believing friends and neighbors and what God's word says those lives should be like. They have the little fish bumper sticker on the back of their cars, they're always talking about Jesus this and Jesus that, but they live just like the world.
- D. Brethren, God hates that kind of worship hypocrisy, and He hates it in us just as much as He hates it in those around us. Consider Samuel's words to Saul in 1 Samuel 15:22. Saul has just disobeyed God by sparing animals that God wanted destroyed, and just before this Scripture, he has tried to excuse himself by claiming that he did so from the best of motives, that he did so because he wanted to sacrifice those animals to God.
- E. Samuel makes perfectly clear what God thinks of that. God does not buy the argument that really good worship ought to cover our disobedience. He is not interested in the sacrifice, no matter how wonderful, that is offered from a disobedient heart. If we attempt to come before the Lord with our hands still stained by the evil that we have done, He will turn His face away from us. Disobedience is doom for worship.
- F. However, just as the Scripture reveals how our words and actions can come between us and God, it also explains what we can do to please God. Look, for instance, at Isaiah's vivid portrait of the worshiper to whom God will listen in Isaiah 66:1-2. God is great beyond all of our knowing. It is amazing to think that someone as magnificent as He would ever pay attention to someone as lowly as us, and yet God describes the conditions under which He will hear us. We have to be humble, we have to be contrite, and we have to tremble at the word of God. This means, friends, that, as Paul says of the Thessalonians, we must be people who recognize the word of God as from God. We have to understand that it is literally God speaking to us, and that we need to emphasize it as much as its lofty origin demands. God isn't impressed by people who sing false doctrine. God isn't impressed by people who sing meaningless phrases of their own devising. What God wants to see from us is song worship that is filled with His word and displays a reverence for His word. If we regard His holy truth in our singing, we become worshipers whom He will regard.
- G. Similarly, if we struggle with obedience in our lives, we need to resolve those problems before we devote ourselves to the worship of the most high God. This is precisely the point raised by Hosea in Hosea 14:1-2. God is a holy God, friends, and that means that He requires holy worshipers. This doesn't mean that we have

to be perfect in and of ourselves, but it does mean that we need to ask Him to perfect us before we come to Him in worship. Customarily in our prayers, we seek God's forgiveness at the end of the prayer, but at times in the assembly, some men will begin their prayer with a plea for forgiveness. That's a way of thinking that applies equally well to our song worship. God is faithful to forgive us and cleanse us from all unrighteousness, but He does not cleanse us until we ask for it. That means, friends, that if we want to make sure that our worship reaches the throne of God, we need to make sure that we are clean in the sight of the Lord before we even open our mouths. Only thus can we ensure that we are pleasing to Him.

II. Completing Worship with the Congregation.

- A. God, of course, is only fifty percent of our audience when we sing, and in many ways, He's the easiest fifty percent to deal with. There can easily be worship problems with the congregation too. Remember, friends, one of the two primary objects of our singing is to teach and admonish them. If they're not on board with that Scriptural goal, we're going to have a difficult time accomplishing what God wants us to.
- B. The first way that the congregation can wander from God wants is a familiar foe from our own hearts: apathy. Sadly, it is not uncommon for apathy to overwhelm not just individuals, but entire churches. Along these lines, consider with me Jesus' condemnation of the apathy of the church of Laodicea in Revelation 3:15-16. It's not that the Laodiceans were disobeying God; it's that they weren't obeying Him either. They were stuck in a lukewarm no-man's-land, and Jesus makes clear here that He hates that behavior.
- C. Two thousand years later, churches can still quite easily fall into the same spiritual problem. Interestingly enough, song worship is actually one of the easiest ways to diagnose the disease. I can't for the life of me point to one or two specific reasons why, but when I'm in a congregation that is just singing and not worshipping, I know it, and I think that's a perception that most if not all Christians share. There's nothing going on that would make us do a 180 and walk out the door if we were visiting, like a band up on the stage, but it's still clear that everything in that worship service is not proceeding according to God's plan. We still have a responsibility to try to teach an apathetic congregation, but it is unlikely that we will succeed.
- D. Likewise, we can have spiritual struggles with congregations that aren't interested in God's goals for worship. As we've said throughout this week, God wants our singing to be a rich expression of His word, yet there are many who judge hymns for reasons other than their teaching content. Christians like this are easy to spot. When you ask them about the hymns they like, they'll talk about hymns that are exciting, or have a pretty tune, or are fun to sing, or that the brethren really like, but they won't ever say that they like hymns for the teaching that they contain. Don't get me wrong, brethren; it's fine to like a hymn tune, or enjoy singing a particular hymn, but those are our goals, and we can't ever allow them to take precedence over God's goals.
- E. If our congregation chooses hymns that are entertaining over hymns that teach, at its worst, it may be a problem with itching ears. Look at Paul's comments on this in 2 Timothy 4:3. In context, of course, Paul is talking specifically about those who love empty preaching, but his comments apply equally well to those who prefer empty hymns. Their ears itch for something other than the nourishing, soul-saving truth of God's word.
- F. Brethren, if we find ourselves in a congregation that has one of these problems, the only cure for the disease is a double dose of the word of life. Solid Bible teaching and continued obedience can awaken any congregation to worship. We see the divinely inspired cure for the apathy of the Laodiceans described in Revelation 3:18. What those Christians needed to do to get better was to recognize how far they had fallen and then take the necessary steps to correct it. The word is filled, brethren, with teaching and illustrations that will help us to recognize the symptoms of apathy in ourselves today. A congregation that has succumbed to the wasting of apathy needs to be presented with those teachings, and they need to be made to recognize what they are seeing in the mirror of the word. This can transform not only our singing, but all the work we do for God.
- G. Similarly, if we detect a pattern of entertainment rather than teaching in the singing of our congregation, the Bible can help us with that problem too. Look at Paul's advice to Timothy in 2 Timothy 1:13, 2:2. We need to hold fast to the truth ourselves, and we need to teach others about it. It's not anybody's opinion, friends, that hymns have to contain a rich indwelling of God's word. It's not anybody's opinion that hymns should teach and admonish us to the highest degree possible. That's what the Bible says, and that's what we need to say.
- H. Sometimes, friends, simply pointing these things out in God's word is enough to transform the attitude of a congregation. Sadly, the church is woefully undertaught about these Scriptural concepts. It amazes me that when I'm going around preaching these things, one of the most common comments I get is, "I've been a Christian for decades, and I've never heard a sermon before about the content that our hymns should have." Many of us just have never made the connection between Colossians 3:16 and the idea that our song worship is a teaching tool. Brethren like that aren't unwilling to do what's right; they just hadn't ever thought about what the right thing to do is. Admittedly, though, there are times when doing the right thing is more difficult. All of us have favorite hymns that we have loved forever, and it can be a struggle to give those hymns up when we're shown that they aren't as suitable for worship as other hymns. In these things, though, we must always remember that it's not pleasing ourselves that our worship is about. It's about pleasing God.

Conclusion. If you haven't been pleasing God in your life, today is the day to change that.