

Engaging the Heart in Worship

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Introduction.

- A. As we consider the heart and the impact that it has on worship, it quickly becomes clear to us that proper song worship is the result not just of a collective decision, but of individual effort. There might not be a piano within miles of our building, but that doesn't guarantee that our worship is pleasing to God. Our song leaders may choose only the best hymns, but that doesn't mean that we're actually using those hymns as God wants us to.
- B. There is no external force that is going to make us worship if we don't want to. As we saw yesterday, the twin evils of apathy and pride can wreck our worship, sometimes before we are aware of it. This is precisely why Solomon speaks as he does in Proverbs 4:23. Just like a toxic waste dump by the source of a river will pollute that river throughout its entire length, if our hearts are corrupted by Satan, soon his influence will spread to our actions as well. The only way to prevent this corruption is through vigilance over our inmost being.
- C. Of course, this vigilance cannot be confined to only watching. Merely being aware of our heart problems is not enough to check their disastrous effects, any more than a man who is diagnosed with physical heart disease will get better if he continues to live off of cheeseburgers and French fries. We need to know not just how to spot a failing heart, but how to cure it. Nor is this curative process one that should merely return us to what we consider an acceptable status quo. Instead, the only way to keep from dying spiritually is to continue growing spiritually. With this in mind, let's look at a course of treatment for engaging the heart in worship.

I. Preparation.

- A. The first important habit to practice in engaging our hearts for worship is preparation. Really, this idea is nothing more than common sense. No runner is going to begin a marathon without doing stretches and exercises to prepare his body for the coming exertion. No homeowner is going to paint his living room without preparing for that occasion by buying paint and other supplies first. Last but not least, no preacher worth his salt today is going to get up in front of a congregation and preach without ordering his thoughts and preparing his sermon beforehand. We need to learn to prepare the same way for our song worship. It's a sacred thing, and God doesn't deserve the afterthought of an ill-prepared heart. He deserves our best.
- B. Consider, for instance, the way that the church in Antioch prepared to send Paul and Barnabas on the first missionary journey in Acts 13:1-3. As soon as the Holy Spirit spoke, the leaders of the church didn't just say, "OK, guys, get your things. It's time to go." Instead, the divine command was met with a period of separation and preparation. The church leaders, along with Paul and Barnabas, prayed. They fasted. The leaders laid hands on Paul and Barnabas to prepare them for the journey. Why? Because they knew that this was an important work, and they wanted Paul and Barnabas to be as ready for it as possible.
- C. We should seek the same thing in our worship. Our preparation, too, should begin with prayer, nor is the prayer we offer in the assembly all the praying that we should do. Instead, we should humbly and individually approach God to seek His blessing upon the work we are about to do for Him. Only with His help can we do our best. Similarly, we can learn from the way that the Christians in Acts 13 fasted. This doesn't have to be a literal abstaining from food, of course; Isaiah 58 makes it clear that God is far more concerned with a fast that is inward than a fast that is outward. However, before our worship begins, we should seek the same goals that some in the first century used fasting to pursue. As we saw yesterday evening, distraction and inattention is a common failing in worship, and one of the original purposes of fasting was to eliminate those things. We too need a way to keep our minds from wandering. It may be that we do literally fast; it may be that we just spend some time alone with God before the assembly, so that we put a spiritual distance between ourselves and the things that make our minds wander. Then, we can lift up our hearts to God with clarity and focus.
- D. We see another way we should prepare described in Exodus 19:10-11. Just like the Israelites did on this occasion, we too need to cleanse ourselves and accept the consecration of God. Friends, there can be no more abhorrent sacrifice than the one that we offer to God with our lips when our lives are not pleasing to Him. Only the holy can dare to approach God. Just like we do with the Lord's Supper, we need to examine ourselves to make sure that our lives are free from sin, and if we do find sin within ourselves, we need to repent of it and seek God's forgiveness before the first note comes from our throat. Let's be ready for God.

II. Perception.

- A. Also in this passage from Exodus 19, we see a hint of the second way to engage our hearts: the perception that God is present with us. Obviously, there are some significant differences between our worship experience and the experience of Israel at Mount Sinai. They literally did see the presence of God. They literally did hear His voice, and the experience terrified them to the core of their being. As the Hebrews writer says in Hebrews 12, we haven't come to a mountain like that. We don't experience God in the same way. However, it is still

quite true that God is with us. Consider the promise of Jesus in Matthew 18:20. Every time just a couple of us get together in His name, there won't be fire or thunder or lightning, but He will be in our midst.

- B. Once we get that down, it makes us far, far less vulnerable to the problem of apathy, a problem that God zeroes in on in His people in Malachi 1:11-12. When we are apathetic and don't show reverence and awe for the One who is among us, we create a truly cosmic irony. There is no one greater than God. There is no one who can match His accomplishments; there is no one who can overshadow His glory. And yet, when we show apathy and contempt in our song worship, God isn't even being glorified by those who supposedly know Him best. Is it any wonder that treating God in that way, really, really irritates Him?
- C. Nor is this a problem that would just be erased if God were visible. Despite all the atheists who claim that they would worship and glorify God if they could see Him, in reality, they wouldn't do any differently than they do now. After all, when the children of Israel made the golden calf at the foot of Mount Sinai, the glory of the Lord was still perfectly visible at its top. They saw God, and they still didn't care. The problem that the Israelites had, and I think the problem that we have, is that we don't get how relevant God is.
- D. This is a problem that we have to solve for ourselves. We have to learn on a gut level that God is with us and what it means that He is with us. We have to understand what Paul says in Philippians 2:9-10. God really is the One who is in charge of us. He has the right to order our actions and even our thoughts in a more profound way than any other master possibly can. He is holy, and He demands that we treat Him as holy. He is so centrally important that we have no reasonable alternative but to worship Him, because He is God and we aren't. In point of fact, there actually is no alternative to worshiping Him. As Paul tells us, the time will come when every knee will bow. The only question is when. Are we going to bow the knee now of our own free will, or are we going to bow the knee later when the unveiled majesty of God compels us to do it?
- E. The point is, friends, that what we do in our song worship is significant because the One whom we are worshiping is significant, and we should not allow our familiarity with Him to breed contempt. This is a common human failing, that as we become used to things, we stop paying attention to them. I suspect that if we started driving to work every day across a bridge over a lake of molten lava, it wouldn't be more than a week or two before we stopped even looking over the side. We can't be like that with God. Instead, let's train ourselves to habitually perceive Him as with us, and let that understanding transform the way we sing.

III. Progress.

- A. It's not enough, however, to just prepare for worship, recognize the presence of God, and once we've reached that point, just camp out there for the rest of our lives. Instead, God expects to see progress in the way that we worship in song, just as He expects to see progress in every aspect of our spiritual lives. If we aren't growing spiritually, friends, we're dying. Making progress in this area is not just desirable, but essential.
- B. This is something that's important for us to do not just if we are concerned about our worship, but even if we are fairly happy with it. For instance, consider Paul's admonition to the church in Thessalonica in 1 Thessalonians 4:1-2. Paul makes it clear that the brethren there are progressing every bit as well as he might have hoped, but he doesn't want them to rest on their laurels. He wants them to excel still more, to abound in doing God's work. This isn't an easy process. Paul tells us in Philippians 3 that we follow the UPWARD call of God, and as anybody who has ridden a bicycle knows, you don't go uphill by coasting. It requires effort, force, and momentum. If we want to get better at praising God in song, we're going to have to work at it.
- C. In addition to the ways that we've already discussed, there are a few other things in which we can progress in our worship. The first is by developing our singing skill. If we can't sing or read music at least somewhat, at a minimum, it hinders our ability to learn new hymns and worship effectively with them. I know this as well as anybody. About 10 years ago, when I first got involved with hymnwriting, I couldn't read music at all, and the evenings that we spent together trying out new hymns were entirely miserable. Only as I slowly and painfully developed my capacity did I expand my ability to free my mind for the worship that was the point.
- D. Similarly, it's important that we train ourselves to learn from the hymns that we are singing. This too is not an overnight change. If we haven't been paying attention to the words of the hymns we sing for decades, that's a big rut to drag ourselves out of. However, it's important that we do so. Only as we make a practice of listening to what others are singing to us can we make our song worship as powerful as God wants it to be.
- E. In this quest for better worship, though, we must recognize what God says our goal for spiritual growth is. This is revealed in Ephesians 4:15. We have reached the point of spiritual maturity in worship when we have reached the capacity for worship that Christ had. We know very little about how Jesus sang. In fact, the only time that Scripture mentions Jesus involved in song worship is before He and His disciples left the upper room to go to the Mount of Olives on the night of His betrayal. However, it is fair to say of Jesus that His entire life was an act of worship, and that surely expressed itself in His song worship. Let's worship that way too.
- F. There are many ways we can try to describe this worshipful heart, but one of my favorites comes from an old hymn written by Charles Wesley, "O for a Heart to Praise My God." Changing our hearts to better worship is an extremely difficult process, but it's an important one. Let's make ourselves what God wants us to be.

Conclusion. If your heart isn't right with God, in this or any other matter, make it right with Him tonight.