

QUESTION #33:
“WHY DO WE PRAISE WITH MUSIC?”
(Psalm 33:1-5)

3.15.20

INTRODUCTION

We live in a world of some 7.7 billion people. And it seems that we see some piece of every one of those 7.7 billion people all around us, as we live in a time featuring an incredible array of tastes. We see it in fashion. We see it in hairstyles. We see it in art. We see it in cars. We see it in restaurants. We see it in sports. We see it in entertainment. We see it in weddings. I’ve even seen it in wedding vows. But this incredibly wide range of tastes, of likes and dislikes, is borne out in few places like it is in music.

Did you know that, by one count, there are 1,264 genres of popular music recognized in the world today? And did you know that *Billboard*, a recording industry magazine, tracks some 124 different categories of music in their charts? Did you know that album sales of contemporary Christian music grew from 31 million in 1996 to 44 million in 2000 to over 50 million a few years later? And that contemporary Christian music includes but is not limited to Christian country, Christian pop, Christian metal, Christian hardcore, Christian punk, Christian alternative rock, Christian R&B, Christian electronic dance, and Christian hip hop? Or that, due to the fact that contemporary Christian music is identified more by its lyric content than by its musical style, contemporary Christian music can be found to be accompanied by the rhythms of salsa, reggae, rock, folk, hip hop or rap, ballads, country, pop, and even extreme forms of music such as punk and heavy metal?

Now, at the same time, music in worship has become one of the most divisive issues in the church today. Why? Because music is seen in a very personal way by so many of us.

For a lot of people, the music that was part of their initial contact with Jesus Christ made a particular music very special. For many people, they have extremely fond memories of the music they grew up with. For many people, being surrounded as we are by music in our culture, there is a natural attraction to churches whose musical sound attracts them. There are obvious divides between somewhat more traditional “old-people” music and newer styles that connect with younger people. And for some people who have been attending church for years, the arrival of new music, new songs and new styles signals a move away from the familiar and a move toward potentially feeling very marginalized by contemporary trends — to the point where seniors rightfully ask if there is still a place for them in today’s church family.

The potential for music to be a divisive instead of a unifying component of worship was really driven home to me many years ago at a church where I was serving as their minister of music (choir director). They presented a video series, “The Purpose Driven Church” from Rick Warren at Saddleback Church out in California. There were five (5) presentations in the series: How to make the church — (1) warmer through fellowship, (2) deeper through discipleship, (3) stronger through worship, (4) broader through ministry, and (5) larger through evangelism. First two sessions, the audience response was virtually nil. The third session, “Stronger Through Worship,” tripped the music trigger; they talked for over two hours — sometimes pretty intensely. Why? Because music was personal — which also translated that worship itself was personal. Is it?

Now, these are all valid, serious issues so, while not all questions may be answered this morning, we are going to try to find some biblical keys as to how we should evaluate our worship experience here in Redwood. And perhaps the best place to start that evaluation is with a clear definition of what worship itself is. And to do that, let's begin with our text.

TEXT

Sing joyfully to the Lord, you righteous; it is fitting for the upright to praise Him. Praise the Lord with the harp; make music to Him on the ten-stringed lyre. Sing to Him a new song; play skillfully, and shout for joy. For the word of the Lord is right and true; He is faithful in all He does. The Lord loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of His unfailing love — Psalm 33:1-5.

ANALYSIS

Archaeology has provided us with a pretty good idea of music's place in the ancient world. A hymn written for the acknowledgement of ancient gods, both music and lyrics, was found on a tablet that dated back to about 1400 BC (about the time Israel was entering the Promised Land). They have even found so-called "theory tablets," with instructions on how to tune various instruments, that date all the way back to 1800 BC (the approximate date for the death of Joseph in Egypt as recorded in Genesis 50).

Now initially, we know from the Bible that music was a rich part of Israel's daily life. Music could be found at family parties. Music, singing and dancing were a part of the celebration of welcoming returning troops from successful military campaigns. It was part of the ceremonies when kings ascended to the throne. Music was part of the entertainment at banquets both of the royals and the wealthy, and it was also a part of the mourning at funerals. But it wasn't really until King David's time (approximately 1000 BC) that music became a more formalized component of worship with professional musicians — an orchestra and singers — to lead the nation in praise to God. We can see that in notes that accompany a number of the Psalms that reflect specific instructions for the music:

- 1) Psalm 4 — *for the director of music, with stringed instruments.*
- 2) Psalm 5 — *for the director of music, for pipes (flutes).*

Additional terms such as *sheminith* (Psalm 6) and *shiggaion* (Psalm 7) are thought to be musical or literary terms, possibly indicating a melodic pattern, choreography (dancing was also a part of their worship), or special instructions to the singers. The term *selah* is a possible instruction to the director, thought to mean a sudden clash of cymbals or a quiet instrumental interlude giving the audience time to meditate on the words they were hearing. And the instruments that accompanied worship contributed melody and harmony (wind instruments such as trumpets (horns) and flutes, and stringed instruments such as harps and lyres), along with percussion (cymbals and timbrels (tambourines)). **BOTTOM LINE:** Music had a major role in enhancing ancient Israel's worship experience.

There is less reference to the music in the NT partly due to the fact that there are only a few decades of history being recorded in the founding and development of the early church as opposed to the many centuries recorded in the OT. Even so, there are references to music in the context of NT worship:

- 1) ***[Speak] to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ — Paul, Ephesians 5:19-20.***
- 2) ***Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts — Paul, Colossians 3:16.***

Now, back to Psalm 33. What does the author of this psalm trying to tell us about worship?

- 1) First, that worship is directed to the Lord: Sing joyfully ***to the Lord***. In fact, the psalmist says that ***it is fitting*** — it is appropriate, it is proper, it should be an absolutely natural response — to praise, to direct our worship, to God.
- 2) Second, worship is a response to God from His people, from those who lives are ruled by Him. The psalmist’s words to ***sing joyfully*** are directed to ***you righteous . . . the upright***. Clearly the worship of God can only truly come from the people of God, from people who truly know Him by His place in their lives and, most importantly, whose lives are cleansed and pure towards Him:
 - a) ***You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise — David, Psalm 51:14-17.***
 - b) ***“To love [God] with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices” — a teacher of the law, Mark 12:33.***
- 3) Third, worship is what the Lord deserves. Why? The psalmist tells us:
 - a) ***The word of the Lord is right and true.***
 - b) ***The Lord is faithful in ALL He does.***
 - c) The Lord has filled the earth with ***His unfailing love***.
- 4) So how are we encouraged to worship? With music and with our voices:
 - a) ***Sing joyfully.***
 - b) Praise with the playing of instruments ***skillfully***: the harp and the lyre. The idea here is not to play perfectly, or that you can only play if you have a certain proficiency, but rather to play in a way that is designed to be pleasing to God, much as the old Baptist hymn encouraged: ***Give of your best to the Master; give Him first place in your heart; give Him first place in your service; consecrate every part*** — Howard B. Grose (1902).
 - c) Even ***shout for joy*** — the idea of our voices replicating the call of horns to celebrate the moment. Remember Psalm 100 (particularly in the KJV)? ***Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all ye lands — Psalm 100:1 (KJV)***. What does that mean? Think winning an important sporting event and the cheering that occurs, or the moment a goal is scored in a hockey game: that’s a “joyful noise.”

So, with that as backdrop, let’s begin with some definition. What could we say is worship?

How about these:

- 1) Worship is the activity of glorifying God in His presence with our voices and hearts. It is the reverent devotion and allegiance pledged to God; the rituals or ceremonies by which this reverence is expressed. This word comes from the Old English word “worth-

ship,” a word that denotes the worthiness of the one receiving the special honor or devotion.

- 2) Worship is a direct expression of our ultimate purpose for living, *to glorify God and fully to enjoy Him forever* (taken from the *Westminster Large Catechism, Question One*). God said as much through the prophet Isaiah, referring to **“everyone who is called by My name, whom I created for My glory, whom I formed and made” — God speaking, Isaiah 43:7.**
- 3) Now both the Hebrew and Greek words for “worship” create a very humbling but clear picture:
 - a) SHACHAH (shaw-khaw[^]) — a verb meaning to bow down (the primary meaning), to prostrate oneself, to crouch, to fall down, to humbly beseech, to do reverence, to worship. This verb is used to indicate bowing before a monarch or a superior and paying homage.
 - b) PROSKUNEO (pros-koo-neh[^]-o) — from a derivative meaning to kiss, like a dog licking his master’s hand; to fawn or crouch, to prostrate oneself in homage, do reverence to, adore: worship.
- 4) Therefore, everything connected with worship should be uniquely pointing to God: ***Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen — I Peter 4:10-11.***

Now Peter in these words about worship also brings up the word “praise.” Certainly, those two go together. So, what is praise? “Praise” is an act of worship or acknowledgement by which the virtues or deeds of another are recognized and extolled. We are to praise God both for who He is and for what He does. Praising God for who He is, is called “adoration.” Praising God for what He does is called “thanksgiving.” In praise, we reflect back to God that which He has revealed to us about Himself. Praise springs from our fellowship with God and the joy His goodness toward us brings. Praise is a characteristic of those who follow God, even as the absence of praise marks the lost or those out of fellowship with the Lord.

Now, whatever else praise is, it is meant to be a gift for God — from our hearts to Him. It is directed towards Him, it is completely for Him, and it is all about Him. Think about when we are gifting somebody (birthday, Christmas). Do we plan that gift based on what we like or on what they like? [Home Improvement episode: Jill’s birthday (Season 1, Episode 16) — Tim bought Jill a pressure washer for her last birthday]. He’s missed the point, and so do we if we look at praise and worship as being all about us. It’s not. Praise and worship only run on a one-way street. Praise and worship is outbound; in fact, one of the Hebrew words for “praise” specifically defines it as “heaven-bound.”

In fact, both praise and worship highlight a principle that should govern not only those activities in the church, but all others: If the outcome is not reflecting the image of God, if the outcome is not all about God, it has no place in the church of God.

If you look in your bulletins, along with the study guide, there is another insert. On one side is a list of the “names of God,” together with what they mean. On the back side is a list of Jesus’ titles and what those mean. Both sides have one thing in common: They remind us of the overwhelming greatness of our God and His Son — a greatness that completely overpowers and overshadows us. Bottom line: This sheet should remind us that God is absolutely, indisputably worthy of all our praise and worship. He, and He alone, deserves that adoration. Therefore, everything we do in our services should be designed to call attention to God and to direct our hearts and minds to Him — only to Him.

And that brings us back to our central question: why do we praise with music? Several reasons:

- 1) First, God created music; He created everything about it — the ability to make it, the desire to create it, and the talent to play it. God created melody, God created harmony, and God created rhythm. Put all together, using music to praise is a way of giving back to the Creator one of His prized creations: ***He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God — David, Psalm 40:3.***
- 2) Second, music is part of God’s creative nature. Birds sing, whales sing, dolphins sing. Music is a part of the world into which He placed us.
- 3) Third, God sings; the Bible says so: ***The Lord your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in His love He will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing — Zephaniah 3:17.***
- 4) Fourth, music is going to be a part of our eternal lives in heaven; the book for Revelation in particular reveals that, time and time again, music is the vehicle by which praise is offered to God.
- 5) And last, music is one of the strongest forces in our lives. It puts us in a particular mood, it strikes at our emotions, it brings back memories. [PAUL McCARTNEY CONCERT — people crying]. It even physically causes us to move (toe-tapping, dancing). Music is arguably one of the greatest forces of nature we can experience. It is only natural that God has instilled such a force in our lives to uniquely meld with us as we offer our sacrifices of praise and worship to Him.

APPLICATION

It brings up a very valid question to consider: Is our worship bringing glory to God? There are some relatively good standards to measure if, in fact, our worship is fulfilling this singular purpose:

- 1) We should experience God for who He genuinely is. It is not something that is generated from within ourselves by ourselves, but it must rather be a working of the Holy Spirit that causes us to literally pour out our hearts in response to who God is. This also brings up an extremely important question: How are we preparing to experience God? How are we preparing our hearts and minds to be in the unique presence of His worship? [Example of tuning a guitar or COMMUNION]. Some ideas:
 - a) Begin your Sunday focusing on a verse or two of Scripture.
 - b) Pray to God to focus your mind on Him.
 - c) Arrive early to both greet brothers and sisters and to move into the worship center before the music starts.

- 2) We should find genuine delight in the Lord. We are spending time in His presence in a very unique way when we worship. And being in the presence of God in our worship should stamp itself on our hearts as the unique experience it is supposed to be. As the psalmist wrote: *How lovely is your dwelling place, Lord Almighty! My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God. . . . Blessed are those who dwell in Your house; they are ever praising You. . . . Better is one day in Your courts than a thousand elsewhere — Psalm 84:1-2, 4, 10a.*
- 3) We should carry our worship experience into our week. [Concert experiences, “famous person encounter” experiences, birth experiences]. It is a platform from which we can share our faith to those around us: *I will sing of the Lord’s great love forever; with my mouth I will make Your faithfulness known through all generations — Psalm 89:1.*

Practical Issues:

Over the course of being a music minister as well as a pastor, I have heard quite a few responses to musical styles and choices. Here are a few to be aware of:

Our Consumer Culture: Music is, unfortunately, often one of the “deciders” of whether a prospective church is a “good fit.” Very often our culture makes church choice look like any other consumer-driven decision. [STORY: 5-6 weeks at River of Life before first familiar worship song.]. What kept us there despite that? The preaching — the word of God being preached and taught in truth. Because that was so “front-and-center” in that church, it made me focus on the words of these songs that I had never heard before, and found that they too were reflecting God’s truth. Over time, some of those songs became some of my favorites — but it started with seeing their priority: God’s truth!

Musical Styles/Choices: Music, which is meant to enhance worship, often winds up dividing us. Three of the most common responses that I have personally heard are:

- 1) “I hate when we have new songs.” Well, once upon a time, “Amazing Grace” was new. Once upon a time, “Jesus Loves Me” was new. The song “Silent Night” was absolutely new when it was presented at a Christmas Eve service. A couple weeks ago, we sang “Something Beautiful” by Bill & Gloria Gaither. Copyright date for that song? 1971 — almost 50 years ago. If you’re over 50 (like me), once upon a time, that was a brand new song. Songs are only new until we learn them and use them. If the lyrics clearly state God’s truth, then, while the music may be new, the truth is ancient. So, if you don’t know a melody, you can still meditate and be fed by the lyrics.
- 2) “Why don’t we do more hymns?” Personally, I love hymns; I grew up with them, they were actually a part of my piano lessons (my teacher was a preacher’s wife) and they are as valid a form of worship as anything. One reason hymns are sometimes not used is because the lyrics often have words that we simply don’t use any more. A couple of examples:
 - a) From “All Hail The Pow’r Of Jesus’ Name”:

“All hail the pow’r of Jesus’ name, let angels prostrate fall,
Bring forth the royal diadem and crown him Lord of all”
(Diadem: a jeweled crown or headband worn as a symbol of sovereignty)
Also: “Sinners, whose love can ne’er forget the wormwood and the gall”
 (“A source of bitter mortification [great embarrassment and shame] and grief” —

“Wormwood” — an aromatic plant with a bitter taste;

“Gall” — bile, a substance secreted by the liver and famous for its bitter taste)

b) From “Come Thou Fount Of Every Blessing” (second verse):

“Here I raise my Ebenezer, hither by Thy help I’m come” — from I Samuel 7:12.

“Ebenezer” (Hebrew): stone of help, a memorial stone. We probably should make sure we know what all the words mean before we use them.

3) “I don’t like that musical style.” Not surprising — we don’t all like the same clothes, the same foods. The chances of not everybody liking the same musical style is pretty good. And I’m old enough to remember the “shivering of timbers” when guitars first showed up in church, or when the first drums made their appearance. “Good heavens; we must be living in the end times!” But something that may help is this picture: the platter and the meal. The music is the platter upon which the meal — the lyrics — is served. It’s the meal that matters. I know that, if I got a steak on the way, I don’t care if it comes served on a paper towel. I’m not eating the paper towel; I’m eating the steak. That’s the most important thing to me. Likewise, it is the lyrics that should be the most important thing to us. For all the great music I’ve listened to in orchestra halls, and all the great music I have had the privilege of learning to play, none of that classical music — think Beethoven’s 5th Symphony or his “Moonlight Sonata” — to my knowledge ever saved anybody. But some little kid singing “Jesus Loves Me” — now we’re talking opportunity for salvation. Why? It’s all about the lyrics.

And one more question that is worth a bit of time: What about those of us who don’t sing, or don’t play an instrument, who even have no interest in or great love for music? How do we worship? Another story [OAK HILL — all the music but then learning the ministry and skill set of drama]. So ,what does that mean? Worship is not about music (or any other skill). Worship is any activity in which its sole purpose is to honor, praise and glorify God. Translation: Prayer is worship. A dramatic reading is worship. A testimony is worship. Tithing is worship. Hospitality is worship. Anything done for the sole honor and glory of God is worship. That should pretty much cover all we are and all any of us can do.

BOTTOM LINE: Worship is not about us. Worship is to God, about God and for God. Period. That’s where we need to plant our understanding.

CONCLUSION

Now here in our church family, our worship leaders as far as selecting the music for each service, are Rachel, Wayne & Anne, and me. I know that, for all of us, we do everything (including a whole lot of prayer) to make sure that the music aligns with the message and, most important, that the music aligns with God. And I also know that, if you have a question or concern, you can bring it **DIRECTLY** to them. Every church I’ve ever been a part of is challenged by the idea of taking concerns directly to the appropriate person. One of the things we’re trying to encourage here is direct, open, transparent communication with each other. Why talk to somebody not me if your concern is about some of the music chosen by me?

But also, before we close, I am reminded of a wonderful example that I learned from the dad of my senior in Hastings. His dad was also a pastor [THE REST OF THE STORY — Pastor

Steve's dad's response to praise music in his church: Hated the music but focused on the genuine praising of God by a new generation. What he was seeing (and hearing) was a new generation doing what David encouraged his nation to do: ***Give praise to the Lord, proclaim His name; make known among the nations what He has done. Sing to Him, sing praise to Him; tell of all His wonderful acts. Glory in His holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice. Look to the Lord and His strength; seek His face always. Remember the wonders He has done, His miracles, and the judgments He pronounced — David, I Chronicles 16:8-12.***

May our worship always be completely a one-way street — a street that leads directly into the presence of our wonderful God! As the author of Hebrews said so well: ***Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise — the fruit of lips that openly profess His name — Hebrews 13:15.*** Let's pray!