

Worship with Music  
Pastor Joel Stamoolis  
Wasilla Bible Church  
May 31, 2009

Thank you, Steve, and the worship team. Good morning! This is a bit of a role reversal for me. This is usually the time in the service when I get to sit down and enjoy the sermon. For those of you who don't know me, my name is Joel. I'm the worship pastor here at Wasilla Bible Church, and as Larry mentioned earlier, he's asked me to speak this morning, share with you on the subject of worship music. And before we get into worship music...song worship...I wanna start out and make sure we're all clear on what we mean by 'worship', what does worship mean.

If you look it up in Webster's Dictionary you'll find that worship means simply to honor as God. We're called to honor our parents. The Bible tells us to honor the governing authorities. But we worship God alone. Worship is something greater than honor; it's honoring as God, as the most being, person, in the universe, the most important thing in our lives. So true worship, then, is to honor the true God as God. And I like the song we've just sung—It's All About You, Jesus. It's not true worship unless we're honoring Jesus as God, unless we're honoring the true God...Father, Son, Holy Spirit...the God of the Bible, as God. False worship, or idolatry as it's also called, is then to treat anything else or anyone else as if they were God, as if they had a place of highest importance in our lives and in the world.

So worship is actually very simple to define, but its scope is exceedingly broad because if worship is to honor as God, then all of life is an act of worship. Everything we do, from the mundane tasks to the words we speak, should explicitly or implicitly honor the true God as God. And as Christians that's something that we strive for. It's a common theme throughout the New Testament that all of life is an act of worship. A classic verse is Romans 12:1. Paul says offer your bodies as a living and holy sacrifice; this is your spiritual service of worship.

So that's worship in the broad sense. We also talk about worship in a more narrow sense, and that's when we talk about corporate worship, or congregational worship, or 'worship together'. And that's when we're talking about things that the church has done throughout the ages when we gather together, things that we do to honor God as God, together as we gather. And these include spoken prayer, testimonies, giving of financial gifts and offerings, taking Communion, reading and preaching of the scriptures. Today we don't always talk about it as worship, but historically the church always has because to sit and listen to the word of God is a way that we can honor God as God together. And then, of course, singing. And that's what I'm going to focus on today; that's what Larry's asked me to speak about, so I'm gonna just focus on one element of corporate worship today...talking about singing...what we're supposed to do with regards to that.

I'm gonna go to a classic text on singing in the church. It's Ephesians 5:18-19, and you can go ahead and turn in your Bibles to this passage, because we're going to spend pretty much the rest of our time on this text and look at what it has to tell us about worship music. Paul writes

*Do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord.*

And the first thing that I ask is the 'what'. What are we supposed to sing? And the text is fairly clear—songs, hymns, and spiritual songs. But then, what are those? Well psalms, that's easy. Those are the songs from the book of Psalms in the Old Testament. It's basically the Hebrew hymnal that was collected over a number of years. And the church has sung psalms continuously since. Today a lot of the songs that we sing are settings of Psalms. But what does Paul mean by hymns and spiritual songs? Well, today we have...basically I run into two contemporary definitions of the word 'hymn'. A lot of people define 'hymn' as a song that is old, and by that they sometimes don't even mean very old, maybe like thirty years old and it's a hymn. The other definition for the word 'hymn' that I run across is a song that is strophic, and I'll explain what I mean by that. Strophic means that you have multiple verses sung to the same melody. So a song like "Fairness Lord Jesus" you have four verses all sung to the same melody. But then a song like "In Christ Alone," which is a newer song, also has multiple verses sung to the same melody. So a lot of people using this definition will call "In Christ Alone" a contemporary hymn. When the...the term 'praise chorus' actually comes out of this definition for 'hymn,' because back in the sixties and seventies when praise choruses started to be sung they called them choruses because they didn't have multiple verses. They just had a refrain that you'd repeat. Nowadays a lot of praise choruses have multiple verses, and so our terminology gets a little bit blurred. But that's ok, because whether you define 'hymn' as a song that's strophic or

just as an old song, that's not what it meant in the early church. In the early church, the hymns were not old; they were new. And they weren't necessarily strophic, either. So what does Paul mean by the word 'hymn'? In Paul's time, a hymn simply meant a song in praise of God. There were hymns to Apollo; there were hymns to other Greek and Roman gods. Paul obviously is talking about songs in praise of the true God.

Spiritual songs...the word that's translated 'songs' from the Greek also is sometimes translated 'ode'. An ode is a song in praise of someone or something, and then the adjective 'spiritual' means that someone is God. So, again, spiritual songs would mean songs in praise of God. Textually, they wouldn't be different. What there would be different is musical styles. Unfortunately, we don't actually know what the music of that time sounded like. The earliest manuscripts we have for music—about 500 AD, so not for several hundred years later. We don't actually know what the musical distinctions were. That's ok, because what Paul's emphasizing here is that we sing all types of songs. The common denominator is that they're all in praise of God, by which we mean they describe who He is—His nature, His ways, His deeds, His revelation in Jesus Christ. And we respond to who He is.

When I'm planning a worship service there's a question I always try to ask myself—what's the vision of God in these songs? What do these songs tell us about who God is, His nature, His ways, His character; and do they also give us opportunity to respond to all that He is. It should also, then, go without saying that if we're gonna describe and respond to who He is, that the texts need to be rooted in scripture. This doesn't mean they need to quote scripture verbatim. Just a few verses earlier, actually, in Ephesians 14...I'm sorry, verse 14, same chapter [Ephesians 5:14], Paul quotes what we believe to be an early church hymn. It's not a quotation of any other passage of scripture, but it sounds a lot like Isaiah 61. It's an ex... It expounds on Isaiah 61. So whether by direct quotation, or paraphrase, or expounding, our song texts need to be rooted in scripture. This is the 'what' of church music—all types of songs in praise of God.

The next question I wanna look at is 'who are we singing to?' And Paul gives two audiences. The first thing he says is to one another, and then he also says to the Lord. In Christian life we talk a bit about the 'one-anothers'—love one another, serve one another, care for one another. We're also called to sing to one another. The term 'an audience of one' has become something of a contemporary worship catch-phrase. And while the emphasis on God as our audience is good, He's not our only audience. We're called to sing to one another. It's interesting to me that in the passage, even though Paul's clearly talking about times of song, he uses the verb 'speaking' when he talks about one another. He says, "...*speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.*" And that's because when we sing praise to God in the presence of others we're communicating something to one another; we're giving testimony to the reality of Jesus in our lives. We're giving encouragement to one another. In this regard, I feel like I have the best seat in the house. And anybody else in the worship ministry can attest to that. It's really powerful to stand up front here and hear so many voices praising Jesus and crying out to Him. I can honestly tell you I'm consistently encouraged, instructed, edified each week just by what you're telling me when you sing to Jesus.

But obviously we also need to have the Lord as our audience. If we're just singing to one another then it's not worship. Our audience is also the Lord. And I'll be the first to admit that this can be a little bit difficult, because we're worshipping a God we can't see. We believe in faith that He's enthroned in heaven, and that His Spirit is present within us and among us as we sing. But we can't see Him, and it is easy to get distracted. As a worship ministry, there are a number of things we work on to try and minimize distractions. I won't go into those this morning. I'll just mention a couple things that you can do to help minimize distractions.

The first one is think specific. I can't emphasize this strongly enough. I know many of you do this, but as you're singing a song think of specific times in your life... Earlier we sang "Great is Thy Faithfulness." Whenever I sing that song, when I sing about God's faithfulness, I try and think about specific times that I've experienced it in a very powerful way, or in a small way or a large way; or I'll think about a specific circumstance I'm in right now, in which I'm really leaning...counting on...God's faithfulness, hoping to see it manifest. Whatever you can do to think specific, to engage your mind, your heart will follow.

Another thing that's helpful in focusing our attention is not only engaging your mind but sometimes engaging your body. If you're a new Christian I'm sure, at some point, you've wondered 'well, why do some people have their hands up when they sing? Are they, like, waiting for the worship leader to call on them and they get to choose the next song?' I love it when people ask me this question, because it's really easy to answer. Why do some people raise their hands? It's simply what I call a 'posture of prayer.' It's...you see it in the Old Testament, you see it in the New Testament, you see it throughout church history, and it's just a physical thing you can do to help focus your heart and your mind on God. When you...if you see me up here, leading singing, and I have my arm raised, it's not...it doesn't mean that I'm any more spiritual or anything like that. It's just something that I can do to help me,

myself, focus my mind on the God that we're worshipping. There are other postures of prayer that are helpful, physical things that we can do. Probably the most common in our congregation, and I know this because I stand up front and I see you all, is closing one's eyes—just a real simple thing that's sometimes helpful to help focus our attention on an invisible God. Another one that I do see sometimes, but not as much, helpful for some people, is kneeling. These are all postures of prayer, they're all welcome here. Are they necessary for worship? No. But could they be helpful? Yeah, because the goal is that we speak to one another in psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs, and we sing and make melody with our hearts to the Lord. The goal is that our hearts are engaged.

Every Thursday I meet with Pastor Larry to pray for the morning's service, and I pray for his sermon, and he prays for the worship team, and he always asks me if I have a prayer request. And I always give the same prayer request every week. I say, "Pray that there's a good connect with the Lord, that we engage with the Lord as a congregation, as a worship team; that our hearts actually engage with God. So pray for that, that the team works on minimizing distractions." And there are simple things that you can do also, to help minimize distractions, because the goal, as Paul says, is that our hearts are engaged.

I think...I love this phrase, 'making melody with your heart to the Lord,' because one thing... It's clear that God knows our voices are not always, for most of us, all that melodious. What he desires is the melody of our hearts. I know that there are people here that don't like to sing in church because you feel like you have a bad voice; maybe even people have criticized you and told you that you have a bad voice. While it's wrong for people to have criticized you, it's also wrong for us to withhold our voices from God and from the assembly, because it is the melody of our heart that God desires. Many of you know my father-in-law. Some of you may know that he's not the most gifted singer. But nevertheless, I love to sit with him in a congregation and worship because it's the beauty of our heart that God desires. And it's the beauty of our hearts that communicates most clearly to those around us. And while my father-in-law...while it might not ever be considered beautiful singing, it's so beautiful for me to hear his heart for the Lord, it blesses me every time I get to worship with him. We're called to sing, and it's the melody of our hearts—it's the beauty of our hearts—that God desires. If you are reluctant to sing in public because you feel you're a poor singer, I am gonna press you on this briefly because I've been there. While guitar has come fairly easy for me, singing has not. I've not always been a decent singer. I've been told that I couldn't sing. I have specific memories of sitting in the congregation, trying to sing along, and cringing as I hear what I'm trying to do clash with what's supposed to be going on. I've been there, and it's something I pray for you. I pray regularly for our congregation; I pray against the pride that says 'I will not sing in church because I sing poorly.' And I also pray against the pride that says 'I will sing in church because I sound great.' We're called to sing, and it's the melody of our hearts—it's the beauty of our hearts—that God desires. This doesn't mean that we need to be...that we should be lazy or sloppy musically, as a worship ministry or as a congregation. It just means that more important than the beauty of our voices is the beauty of our hearts.

So this is the 'what' and the 'who' of worship music—all types of songs in praise of God, to one another and to the Lord, with all sincerity of heart. Basically there are two musical parameters that flow out of this, because...and I do believe from this passage that we have a tremendous amount of musical liberty in singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, all types of music to God. And the question always arises—well, you know, are there styles of music that we shouldn't sing, or that we shouldn't use in church? And there are basically two musical parameters that flow out of this passage. One: if the text is the common denominator—the most important thing, that the text describe and respond to all that God is, rooted in scripture—then the music needs to serve the text. The medium does affect the message. Contrary to what some people believe, how you say something affects the meaning of what you say. To angrily scream "I love you!" at somebody will not communicate the same thing as if it's tenderly sung. And to mournfully wail "Jesus Reigns" is not gonna communicate the same thing as if it's triumphantly shouted, right? So the music needs to serve the text. It needs to communicate the scripture well.

The other parameter is the music needs to serve the function. It needs to be able to be sung by a group of people together. There are lots of great songs that can be sung by one person, but would be very hard to be sung by five hundred people at the same time. And so that sometimes limits what we can do musically. And this...what a group of people is able to sing...that's always gonna function in a cultural context, in the context of our music culture. I'll explain. See, a lot of people feel that music is a universal language. It's not the universal language. Music, as a phenomenon of organized sound...yeah, that exists all over the world, every culture past and present. But just like there are many different languages around the world that are mutually unintelligible one to the other, there are lots of different systems of music that are unintelligible one to the other. I mentioned earlier we don't know what the music was like at the church in Ephesus. We don't know the musical styles that they used. But we do know what the long tradition of folk and classical music from that area sounds like, and it's very, very different than anything we do in the west, extremely different. For example, we only use twelve notes. They use, for the songs we sing the melodies, they use up to twenty-two. So that means some of the melodies in that region we couldn't even play on a

piano or a guitar because we don't even have the notes to do it. Rhythmically, often they are much more complex, much more what we call syncopated—which means it's not right on the beat. Rock and roll has gotten a bad rap sometimes in the church for being syncopated. In comparison to the music of Asia Minor or Turkey, and a lot of other musics around the world, it's not very syncopated at all. So what a group of people are able to sing together easily depends on the music culture, what they listen to, what they're familiar with.

It also depends...I mean, it goes even to the sub-culture leveling, and that's true in our congregation. I know we're a congregation of diverse musical tastes; even though it's all within western music, we all like and listen to different things and find it easier to sing in some styles rather than others. So one of our commitments as a worship ministry is to lead with a variety of styles and songs, old and new, so that...with the goal that there's some familiarity for all of you. This also inevitably means that there'll be some unfamiliarity for most of us, too. And I encourage you to try and sing the unfamiliar songs and styles as well, because we're called to. There was a time in my life when I thought, 'well, if I don't like the song I'll just sit this one out.' And then I was convicted, because if I'm gonna withhold praise from God and encouragement from His people simply because I don't like the style, I don't like the melody, I don't like the music, then how far does my love really go? And you'll find that as you stretch yourself and sing not only in the familiar styles, but the unfamiliar styles and songs as well, it becomes easier to do so.

There is one cultural factor in our music culture that works against what we're trying to do, and that's that group singing is not very common in America. It's very rare. For a lot of you, Sunday morning may be the only time in the week that you sing with another person. For some of you, it might be the only time you sing at all. There's a lot of places where this would not be the case. I'll tell you a short anecdote just to illustrate my point. A few years ago I went down to Mexico to Pastor Enrique's church, a church we're involved with down there, with three other guys from the congregation. We went down to work on a project. And there was an evening service, and we're in the service, and Pastor Enrique just started calling families from the church up to sing a song for the rest of the congregation. None of them were expecting this, but none of them minded at all. They simply...they just chose a song they knew by heart and sang it. And it was a little bit embarrassing when he called on the four of us to come up and sing, because, well, that was very different for us. And we had trouble finding a song we all knew the words to, and our comfort level at social singing just wasn't that high. So I pray...I pray that we would grow as singers. I pray that we would grow as singers, and I encourage people to sing with others, to sing with other believers outside of Sunday morning. And I do this simply because I want us to be able to sing to one another and to the Lord easily when we get together on Sunday mornings.

One other thing that I want to mention...not only does the music need to serve the function, needs to be able to be sung by a number of people easily together, but also the rate at which...the volume at which we amplify needs to serve the function. We have the capability here...a really nice sound system...to overwhelm you with sound, like a concert. It's fun to do that, but it's not our desire to do that precisely because of this text. We're called to sing together to the Lord, but also to each other. And so to do that we need to be able to hear the worship leader well. But we also need to be able to hear each other. And it's a delicate balance. Our sound technicians work very hard at this, and I know some weeks we err one side or the other. I know it's a difficult facility for this. But that is our goal. As a worship ministry we strive for that. We strive to facilitate what Paul describes, this simple act of singing to one another and to the Lord in a variety of songs and styles.

But even when we do well, and admittedly we're far from perfect...as a ministry, as a worship pastor I'm far from perfect...but even when we do well—if we have a great blend of songs and led well, minimal distractions, great sound mix—we can't produce what Paul describes just through mechanics. The 'how' in the passage is very clear—Paul says *"Be filled with the Spirit."* It's the Holy Spirit that leads us to sing. It's...the whole verse, he says 'Do not get drunk with wine, that's dissipation, that's wastefulness; but be filled with the Spirit.' And that contrast is striking. He's saying, 'Don't be under the influence of alcohol; be under the influence of the Spirit. Let Him influence you. Live under the influence of the Spirit. Yield to His leading, act under His influence.' And then Paul goes on to describe the things that the Spirit will lead us to do. And the first thing he says is the passage we're studying—*"...speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord."* These are things that the Holy Spirit is active inside us, leading us to do. When you're driving down the road in your car and a praise song comes to mind, and you feel an inkling to sing it, yield to it! That's the Spirit, I believe. And same thing when you're with other believers and gather on Sunday morning. These are the things the Spirit will lead us to do, and our job is simply to yield to that, to allow Him to fill us.

We talked about the 'what', the 'who', the 'how' in this passage. I just wanna close by looking at the 'why'. And to do that we're gonna need to look at the passage in its context and back up a few verses. So starting at verse 15, I'll read.

*Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men, but as wise, making the most of your time, because the days are evil. So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord.*

Paul makes an interesting statement. He says "...the days are evil." So make the most of your time...the sense here is redeem the time, sometimes translated that way as well. And he's not saying...he's not making the argument that time is running out. He's saying the time is evil; it's not going to naturally lead to good. As humans we have a tendency towards evil, so therefore as a society we do. Therefore our days, if we don't proactively redeem them they have a tendency toward evil. We know from audio recordings of the Bible it takes 72 hours to read through the Old and New Testament out loud. The average American watches more television than that in two weeks. Our days will not naturally lead to good unless we're proactively trying to redeem the time. And Paul goes on to tell us some different ways we can do that. He says...he gives two positive directives—understand the will of the Lord, and be filled with the Spirit—in this passage we've been studying. Our culture is funny; we have a funny attitude toward music. We treat it as...it's indispensable to us. We carry it around with us everywhere in little iPods, and we have music everywhere. It's indispensable; but at the same time we also treat it as superfluous. I can't affirm strongly enough to you that when we gather together and sing to the Lord, it's far from superfluous. It's a crucial part of the Spirit-filled life. It's one of the primary ways that we redeem the time. It's encouraging, comforting, edifying to one another, and it's pleasing to the Lord.

I know that, for many of you this morning, I'm literally just preaching to the choir. And my encouragement to you is to keep singing from your heart; keep following the Spirit's leading. And for those of you who do not regularly sing with other Christians, my encouragement's the same. Follow the Spirit's leading, take Him seriously, sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with others—here on Sunday mornings, but also whenever you're with other Christians. Let nothing—our culture, our comfort, our pride—impede us from listening to the Spirit and singing songs of praise from our hearts to one another and to the Lord.

Would you stand and join me in prayer. Let's pray.

*Heavenly Father,*

*We desire that the time You have given us be used for good. Do not let anything keep us from worshipping You—not my insufficiencies as a worship pastor, not our pride, not our culture. Help us to grow comfortable with the voices You've given us. May we use them to glorify You and to encourage Your people with sincerity of heart. Lord, may we follow Your Spirit's leading into worship of You. May we not resist Your Spirit, but be filled with Him, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in our hearts to You.*

*Amen.*

[Congregation sings the prayer song.]

Go in His grace.