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## SPIRIT-FILLED SINGING

Ephesians 5:19

By

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Ephesians Lesson 45

## Spirit-filled Singing Ephesians 5:19

As a little boy sat in church, his eyes were drawn to a large flag mounted on the wall, with a number of gold stars attached to it. He whispered to his father, "Daddy, why does that flag have all those stars on it?" His dad whispered back, "To remind us of all those who died in the service." The boy thought about that for a moment and then whispered again, "Did they die in the *morning* service or the *evening* service?"

While humorous, that story hits painfully close to home. At some church services it seems like those sitting there either are dead or at a funeral! They listlessly stare at the screen where the words are projected or they stare out the window or read the bulletin or look at their watch to see how much longer they must endure this ordeal. They don't sing with enthusiasm and evident joy in the Lord.

If a visitor not used to going to church came in, he would not conclude that anything significant was going on. He would certainly not deduce that our God is a God of great joy, whose Holy Spirit produces joy in His people. He might rightly wonder why such apathetic people even bother to go to church at all, since they seem bored by the whole thing.

Our text, "speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord," gives us the first result of being filled with the Holy Spirit (5:18). Rather than being drunk with wine and singing bawdy, raucous songs, those that are filled with the Spirit should sing to the Lord from the heart, with great joy and thankfulness (5:20). In the parallel text (Col. 3:16), Paul commands, "Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God." Paul's point is:

Spirit-filled people will manifest it by spiritual singing.

John MacArthur (*The MacArthur New Testament Commentary, Ephesians* [Moody Press], p. 256) writes, "The first consequence of the Spirit-filled life that Paul mentioned was not mountain-moving faith, an ecstatic spiritual experience, dynamic speaking ability, or any other such thing. It was simply a heart that sings." Joyful, exuberant, heart-felt singing is one evidence that a church is Spirit-filled. Lifeless, listless, apathetic "worship" is not worship at all. It is a sinful disregard of the majesty and grace of our great God and it shows that we are not under the control of His Spirit, who produces overflowing joy in His people (Rom. 14:17; 15:13; Gal. 5:22). It reveals that we are not captured by God's abundant grace and we are not thankful for His many blessings to us.

1. Spiritual singing stems from being filled with God's Spirit and His Word.

As we saw in our last study, the close parallel between Ephesians 5:18 and Colossians 3:16 shows that to be filled with God's Spirit is closely related to being filled with His Word. And a main result of being filled with the Spirit and the Word is to break forth in joyful singing. This is not a matter of having a bubbly personality; many of us don't have and never will have bubbly personalities. But joy is promised to *every* believer who walks by the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:16, 22). As the Spirit of God reveals to you the unfathomable riches of Jesus Christ that have been poured out on you by grace alone, you cannot help but be filled with praise and thankfulness to God, and that praise overflows in singing.

Many years ago, I resisted the idea that worship necessarily involved our emotions. That struck me as being "charismatic" or anti-intellectual. But reading A. W. Tozer ("Worship: the Missing Jewel in the Evangelical Church" [Christian Publications]) and then Jonathan Edwards ("A Treatise on Religious Affections," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* [Banner of Truth]) showed me that I was wrong. Genuine worship stems from our hearts being overwhelmed by the majesty and greatness of God.

So if you recognize that you are not singing with your heart to the Lord, that you are apathetic about worshipping Him, confess your coldness of heart to Him. Ask Him to open your eyes to see more of His glory. Feed your mind on His Word and ask Him to

reveal the riches of Christ to your soul. As He fills you with His Spirit, it will overflow into heartfelt praise and singing.

2. Spiritual singing must be both individual and corporate.

A. Spiritual singing must be individual.

Paul says, "singing and making melody *with your heart* to the Lord." It must begin in your heart or it is just hypocrisy or pumped up emotions. So begin by examining your heart.

The reason you need to begin by examining your heart is that we are commanded often in Scripture to praise God in song. This means that not to sing to the Lord from a heart that is overflowing with His goodness is sin. Although I have not personally confirmed it, I have heard that the most frequent command in the Bible is, "Sing!" And so I ask, "*Do you sing?*" You may say, "I can't carry a tune in a bucket!" I can relate to that remark! I can't hit the notes of many songs. I get frustrated when I try to sing, because it sounds so bad. But, I can't dodge the repeated command, "Sing to the Lord!" Let's look at a few:

Psalm 5:11: "But let all who take refuge in You be glad, let them ever sing for joy; and may You shelter them, that those who love Your name may exult in You."

Psalm 33:1-3: "Sing for joy in the Lord, O you righteous ones; praise is becoming to the upright. Give thanks to the Lord with the lyre; sing praises to Him with a harp of ten strings. Sing to Him a new song; play skillfully with a shout of joy."

Psalm 95:1: "O come, let us sing for joy to the Lord, let us shout joyfully to the rock of our salvation."

Psalm 96:1-2: "Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth. Sing to the Lord, bless His name; proclaim good tidings of His salvation from day to day."

Psalm 98:1: "O sing to the Lord a new song, for He has done wonderful things, His right hand and His holy arm have gained the victory for Him."

Psalm 100:1-2: "Shout joyfully to the Lord, all the earth. Serve the Lord with gladness; come before Him with joyful singing."

Psalm 147:1: "Praise the Lord! For it is good to sing praises to our God; for it is pleasant and praise is becoming."

Psalm 149:1: "Praise the Lord! Sing to the Lord a new song, and His praise in the congregation of the godly ones."

You may think, "But I don't *feel* like singing. Wouldn't I be a hypocrite if I sang when I didn't feel like it?"

It's at those times that we need to confess our coldness of heart to the Lord and ask Him to lift our eyes to all of His blessings that He has freely given us. I've found that often when I'm feeling down, if I put on a praise CD or just begin singing praises to the Lord, my spirit is lifted. That's often what the psalmists did. At the beginning of the psalm, they were overwhelmed by trials. But by the end of the psalm, just from rehearsing God's faithfulness and His attributes, the whole mood of the psalmist has shifted to joyful praise, even though his circumstances are exactly as they were at the beginning. So we need to sing to the Lord individually. Also,

#### B. Spiritual singing must be corporate.

Many of the psalms that we just read have a corporate context. Our text says, "speaking *to one another* in psalms...." The Colossians parallel shows that we are to teach and admonish one another through singing. I've heard it said that we should only sing songs that address the Lord. But this verse implies that there is a place for songs that do not directly address the Lord, but rather exhort one another to go on with the Lord: "O worship the King, all glorious above." "Come, now is the time to worship!"

Down through history, God's people have been characterized by spiritual singing. Whenever the Spirit of God is manifested and God is working in an obvious way, His people express themselves in joyful singing. Here are some examples:

*\*Songs celebrating God's deliverance and salvation*—The earliest recorded song in the Bible is the Song of Moses (Exod. 15:1-18). Verses 20-21 say that Miriam led the women with timbrels (small hand drums or tambourines) and dancing. It all sounds a bit exuberant! Another example is the Song of Deborah (Judges 5:1-31), which they sang after she led a great victory over Israel's enemies.

*\*Songs celebrating God's blessings*—Many of the psalms reflect on God's blessings, but especially Psalm 103, which is pure praise. It begins (103:1-2), "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless His holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget none of His benefits." Then it proceeds to enumerate many of those benefits. Or, in Psalm 18, David sings God's praise for 50 verses because the Lord had delivered him from the hand of Saul and from all his enemies. The Holy Spirit apparently didn't want us to miss that psalm, because it is repeated in 1 Samuel 22!

*\*Songs celebrating anticipated victories by faith*—In 2 Chronicles 20, Israel was facing an imminent invasion by some powerful enemies. King Jehoshaphat called for national prayer and fasting. When the Lord promised victory through one of the prophets in the assembly, the king did a daring thing. Rather than sending out his warriors at the front, he sent out singers before the army, who sang (20:21), "Give thanks to the Lord, for His lovingkindness is everlasting." Then we read that when they began singing, the Lord set ambushes against the enemy so that they began fighting against each other. All Israel had to do was to collect the spoils. Many of the psalms have the same theme. The psalmist is praising the Lord even though his outward circumstances have not changed in the slightest. He does it by faith that the Lord will give victory.

*\*Songs celebrating God's sufficiency in our suffering*—When Paul and Silas were falsely accused and then wrongly beaten and thrown into prison and put in the stocks, their response was to sing praises to God (Acts 16:25). The Lord sent an earthquake, leading to the conversion of the Philippian jailer and his family. Many of the great hymns of the faith have come down to us out of someone's experience of God's sufficiency during their time of suffering.

*\*Songs celebrating God's glorious attributes and His mighty deeds*—Again, many of the Psalms rehearse God's righteousness, faithfulness, power, lovingkindness, and His tender care. They often go over how the Lord has been faithful to Israel in spite of their long history of rebellion and stubbornness.

If you don't like to sing, you're not going to like heaven, because it will be full of singing. Revelation 5:9 records, "And they sang a new song, saying 'Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with

Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation” (see also, 14:3). The song of Moses is the first song in the Bible and it’s also the last (Rev. 15:3-4): “And they sang the song of Moses, the bond-servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying, ‘Great and marvelous are Your works, O Lord God Almighty; righteous and true are Your ways, King of the nations! Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify Your name? For You alone are holy; for all the nations will come and worship before You, for Your righteous acts have been revealed.’”

Throughout church history, God’s people have sung His praises corporately, especially during times of trial and revival. In A.D. 112, Pliny wrote a letter to the Emperor Trajan about the Christians, who were under persecution. Among other things, he reported that they sang an anthem to Christ as God (cited in *Eerdmans Handbook to the History of Christianity*, ed. by Tim Dowley [Eerdmans], p. 124). During the Reformation, Luther revived congregational singing, which had languished during the Dark Ages. Historian Kenneth Scott Latourette states (*A History of Christianity* [Harper & Row], p. 721), “Congregational singing was one of his great joys and he took the initiative in encouraging it and giving it a large part in the liturgy and other services.” Luther himself played the lute (a ten-stringed, guitar-like instrument), wrote many hymns, and issued a hymnal.

One hundred and fifty years later, much of Lutheranism had lost its original zeal and had become a dead, ritualistic church. God raised up the Pietists to bring revival. Among other things, they wrote many new hymns. One of their disciples was a man named Count von Zinzendorf, who became the leader of the Moravians, who had a strong missionary emphasis. He used many of the Pietist hymns, plus wrote some of his own. Most modern hymnals still have his hymn, “Jesus, Thy Blood and Righteousness,” translated by John Wesley. In fact, it was through the Moravians that both John and Charles Wesley were converted out of a moralistic Anglican background. Charles wrote over 7,000 hymns, which God used in the 18<sup>th</sup> century revivals in England and other countries. We still sing many of Wesley’s great hymns, such as, “And Can it Be that I Should Gain?” “O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing,” and “Hark, the Herald Angels Sing.”

About the time that the Wesley's were born, Isaac Watts published the first of several hymnals. He was quite controversial because he promoted the use of man-made hymns (as opposed to using only the psalms). He wrote over 600 hymns, including, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," and "Joy to the World." Later in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the converted slave-trader, John Newton, and his melancholic friend, William Cowper, produced the *Olney Hymns*. Newton wrote the still-popular "Amazing Grace," plus, "Glorious Things of Thee are Spoken," and many more. Cowper wrote "There is a Fountain Filled with Blood," and others.

Some churches no longer sing the great hymns of the past. Other churches have a traditional service that sings hymns and a contemporary service that sings only modern music. I think that both approaches are in error. To abandon the great hymns is to cut yourself off from the great heritage of the faith that has come down to us. Also, these hymns have solid doctrine that make you think about the great truths of the faith. You need this to grow strong and not be tossed around by every wind of doctrine.

To divide the church into traditional and contemporary factions is wrong because we all need to learn from one another. Some of the modern music is vacuous or theologically shallow and ought to be trashed. But, frankly, so are some of the traditional hymns. The test of all music should be, does it have sound doctrine? Does it exalt our glorious God and Savior? Does it humble us in His presence? Do the words and the tune fit together? You shouldn't have an upbeat, happy song about Jesus on the cross. Is it good poetry?

I'm encouraged by some of the newer hymns being written, such as "Grace Unmeasured," and "How Deep the Father's Love." Also, several of the great older hymns can be played to more modern accompaniment, such as "Before the Throne of God Above," and, "Jesus, I my Cross Have Taken." We would be impoverished to lose these!

Sometimes you have to work through outdated language or terms to understand the older hymns. Sometimes, the hymns expose our biblical ignorance or our modern errors. Many modern Christians have no clue when they sing the second verse of "Come Thou Fount." It goes, "Here I raise mine Ebenezer; hither by Thy

help I'm come." Robert Robinson got that line from 1 Samuel 7:12. An Ebenezer was a "stone of help," referring to the Lord's help in delivering Israel from the Philistines.

Many hymnals have changed Isaac Watts' line, "Would He devote that sacred head for such a worm as I." "Worm" is a bit too strong for our inflated self-esteem, so it's toned down to, "for sinners such as I." But Watts took the word "worm" right out of Psalm 22:6, where Jesus on the cross in our place calls himself a worm. If He called Himself a worm as he bore our sin, who are we to think more highly of ourselves?

Sadly, we've lost many great hymns that sustained the saints in the past. Some of you don't know the hymns that I've just referred to! I'm not suggesting that we sing *only* the old hymns, but I am saying that it is a tragedy not to sing any of them. We should strive to pass on to our children and grandchildren the great hymns that we still possess.

Paul's three words to describe singing, "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs," mainly show that there should be variety in our worship. *Psalms* probably refers to the psalms of the Old Testament. *Hymns* refers to hymns of praise to God. There may be some examples of this in the New Testament, such as Ephesians 5:14. *Songs* was a generic word for any kind of song, but Paul qualifies them as *spiritual*. Since God is manifold in His grace and glory, our singing should reflect this variety.

### 3. Some practical suggestions for spiritual singing:

I conclude by giving some practical suggestions. Again, I remind you that I am not a good singer and because of that, it is difficult for me to practice this on a personal level. But praising God through singing is *not* optional. If we don't work at it both personally and corporately, we are not obedient to Him.

(1) *Ask God to put a song on your heart each day.* Even if you can't sing, you can hum it or think about the words, so you'll be singing God's praises throughout the day. If you commute by car (alone), turn off the radio and sing. Invest in and play good Christian music, including some of the great hymns of the faith.

(2) *Use a songbook or hymnal along with your Bible in personal devotions sometimes.* This will help you memorize some of the words.

When you sing with the church on Sundays, if you know the words, close your eyes and think about what you are singing. Madison Avenue uses jingles to keep their products in your mind. Memorizing some good Christian songs and hymns can keep the things of God in your mind during the day.

(3) *Prepare your heart before you arrive on Sunday mornings.* The Jews began their Sabbath the evening before, and that's not a bad idea. At the very least, get up early enough on Sunday to spend some time with the Lord, worshiping Him and preparing your heart to gather with the saints in worship. Arrive a few minutes early.

(4) *Put your all into corporate worship.* It is a sin to be apathetic in worship. I heard of a couple, married for 25 years, who went to a marriage counselor. The wife complained that her husband never told her that he loved her. He snapped, "I told you that 25 years ago and I haven't changed my mind!" That's not good enough! Love has to be expressed. Even a cold, "I love you" isn't as good as a warm embrace. Let the Lord know that you love Him and forget about what others around you may think.

(5) *Think about what you are singing.* Wake up! Be alert! To mumble through words without thinking about their significance is to honor God with your lips, while your heart is far from Him (Mark 7:6). If you can't sing the words honestly, confess it to the Lord. If you need to apply it, ask Him for grace. Engage your brain!

### Conclusion

Our time of singing is not just something we do to fill the time before all the latecomers arrive. It is not a time to manipulate our emotions, to get everyone pumped up with moving music. It is a time to worship God in spirit and in truth. It should engage our minds, our emotions, and our bodies as we exalt our glorious God and His great salvation. Be filled with the Spirit and sing with all your heart to the Lord!

## Application Questions

1. Since musical taste is somewhat subjective, how can we decide which music is appropriate for worship? What criteria apply?
2. Are there any examples of using music for evangelism in Scripture? Is this practice right or wrong or neutral? Why?
3. There are extremes of emotional expression in worship. Does Scripture put boundaries on this? What guidelines apply?
4. Do you agree that true worship necessarily engages the emotions? Give biblical support for your answer.

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