

The Worship War

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 15 October 2023

Preacher: Joe Hall

- [0 : 00] If I were to say the words, worship war, what would come to mind? One pastor in another church told me he'd recently lost the battle over the light switch on a Sunday.
- He wanted the lights on so that people could see their Bibles as he was speaking. The quote, worship leaders wanted the lights off to create an atmosphere.
- The light switch became a battleground. But is it the battleground? In another church, I know the pastor's patience was tested when those leading the singing started stretching it out.
- One song became two, became three, then a prayer, then a word from Scripture. Until after the quote, worship time, the pastor would stand up to give a much abbreviated sermon.
- Now, short for time, what was the battleground there? Perhaps the mic, perhaps the stage? Or is it something else? When we hear of worship wars, what is it that we think we're talking about?
- [1 : 14] Normally, what happens on a Sunday, normally something to do with singing. That's for another time. But what do we think? We think, don't we, I'm so glad we don't have that in our church.
- What a relief that there isn't a worship war here for us. But the teacher says, there is a worship war in every church.
- There's battles for the light switch, for the mic, are only the propaganda, are only the colors, the flags of different sides. But the worship war is going on on the inside.
- Because it is a battle for you. It is a battle for your hearts. And it is not fought between you and other people in your church.
- It's not even fought between God and idols. It is fought between you and God. It is a war fought between you and God over who gets to speak and who gets to be listened to.
- [2 : 25] See that in verses 1 and 2 of our chapter. Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools who do not know that they do wrong.
- What's the sacrifice of fools? Verse 2. Do not be quick with your mouth. Do not be hasty in your hearts. Utter anything before God. When we come to God, says the teacher, he gets to speak.
- And we get to listen. But our hearts are noisy places. Noisy enough to stop us from hearing.
- Or give us selective hearing. Noisy enough to make themselves heard in our own thoughts. Our own internal dialogue. In our own words. The teacher says when it comes to God, we have a hearing problem and a speech problem.
- Because we have a heart problem. Who can say tonight even that they've never been distracted by their own thoughts as they sit in church?

[3 : 29] Have we not ever caught ourselves daydreaming? Even as the sermon is being preached, we think that it's noisy and it's busy in here after the service.

Friends, it can be just as noisy and just as busy during the service. Even if it's only the preacher's voice we can hear. There is a war for your heart tonight and it is a worship war.

Who gets to speak and who gets to be listened to? Now this might seem like it's coming out of nowhere in Ecclesiastes. As I said last time, it's not as straightforward as other books of the Bible.

But the last two words in verse 7 give us a point of contact. There's one of our touchstones in this book. Fear God. Fear God. That is, recognize Him as God and treat Him as God.

Put your time-bound understanding and your finite strength next to His infinite and eternal wisdom and power and be humbled before Him.

[4 : 36] When God is big and I am small and I am living like it, then I am fearing God. Let me be clear that it's not the same as being scared of God.

It is putting Him in His proper place on the throne and putting me in my proper place at His feet. In the Bible's vocabulary, when I'm fearing God, I'm loving Him.

I'm worshiping Him. Now why does that help us understand why this bit of Ecclesiastes is here? Because the last bit of Ecclesiastes, remember, in chapter 4, said we're living wisely.

We're living as we're designed to live when we love others as we love ourselves. But that's only the second greatest commandment. What is the greatest commandment?

Jesus said, love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and the greatest commandment. And the second is like it.

[5 : 39] Love your neighbor as yourself. I've had a few conversations like this over the years. Perhaps you have as well. And maybe you've said something like this yourself.

Jesus said it comes down to two great commandments. Love God and love people. It's the same as every other religion. If only Christians would stop making it so complicated.

I love God. I love people. And Jesus says that's all there is to it. Have you had a conversation like that before? But he doesn't quite say that, does he?

He doesn't say love God. Love any God. Love God as you understand him or her or them to be. He says, love the Lord your God.

Love the covenant God. Love the God of the Bible. Love the one true and living God. Love the Lord Yahweh. Love him with your whole being.

[6 : 36] Be devoted to him. Heart, soul, mind, and strength. Does every religion teach that? Are we all really doing that just in our own way?

As Christians, we don't make it complicated. We just listen to what Jesus actually said, don't we? Last time the teacher taught us wisdom in keeping the second greatest commandment.

Love your neighbor as yourself. But behind that and before that, he says, you need wisdom in keeping the greatest commandment. Love the Lord your God with everything that you are.

Give him all of it. If that is the greatest commandment, then surely the battle we have to keep it must be the worship war.

I think that's why these verses are here. The teacher's thoughts can be hard to follow. But I think that bigger biblical perspective on what is most important, the greatest commandment, helps us to see what these verses are doing for us tonight, which is to teach us wisdom in loving God as God's word commands.

[7 : 48] So how do we come to him? Firstly, come near to listen. Secondly, be slow to speak. Firstly then, come near to listen.

Just have another look at verse 1. Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools who do not know that they do wrong.

It's a really clever sentence in Hebrew. The word for guard is shamar. The word for listen is shamah. So two commands that sort of play off each other.

Shamar, shamah. Guard your steps. Go near to listen. I was thinking about it in the week. The phrase watch and wait does the same kind of thing for us in English.

Two instructions that go together and we can hear that they go together. In the way that they sound. Even the words tell us that these things fit. Now in what way?

[8 : 50] To guard your steps means something like tread carefully. Watch your step. To go near to listen means to be prepared to receive.

To have an open ear. I want to hear rightly. Put them together and what's the teacher saying? Take care that you're coming to God to hear him well.

Shamar to shamah. Be careful to listen. Now this sounds straightforward enough, doesn't it, in a church like this. But put that back into life under the sun.

Put that back into your life and hear it again. I don't know what Sunday mornings are like in your house. But I tell you, getting two small boys and two adults out of the door on a Sunday morning, it is not easy.

You get to church. You might be on a rotor to serve. Lots of people to catch up with. You might be having people back for lunch, as many of you did this morning or at lunchtime.

[10 : 01] Maybe you just about got the timer on the oven set before you had to get in the car and go. Come Sunday evening. And Monday is looming large on the horizon.

Next week is waiting for you. To some of us, the service itself, this time that we're in now, these are the quietest waking hours of our lives.

But that makes it even harder, doesn't it? Even harder for us to quieten our hearts and tune out the background noise and come near to listen.

In a church like ours, the problem isn't so much the idea that God is speaking, but the fact that everything else going on in our lives talks over him. If life was simpler, if it didn't have so much else going on, if the children were just bigger, if that person that I love wasn't going through such a hard time, then I could listen and receive what God has to say to me tonight.

And it's not just a Sunday problem, isn't it? Monday morning, you open your Bible, and your eyes are drifting, and your phone is buzzing, and your emails are waiting for you. Friends, God knows it's a battle.

[11 : 17] God knows that it is a battle. We read earlier, he has seen it with his own eyes. Jesus visited his friend's house once, two sisters, Mary and Martha.

What did he find going on in their home? A worship war. A worship war. Mary sat at the Lord's feet, listening to what he said, but Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made.

Martha is distraught, isn't she? She comes to the Lord and orders him, tell her, tell her to get up and help me. Isn't that all what we want to do?

In the stress, the busyness, the chaos of our lives? But Jesus turns it all on its head, doesn't he? Martha, he said, you are worried and upset about many things, but one thing is necessary, and it is what Mary is doing.

We'd love to think that if there wasn't so much to do, that Martha would have sat down and listened to Jesus too, but that's not why she wasn't listening, says Jesus, says the teacher.

[12 : 28] She wasn't listening because she hadn't taken care of her heart in the busyness and the distraction of her everyday life.

Instead, she had been swept up in the busyness and the distraction, and it worries and upsets her, so that she ends up coming to the Lord and doing what? Offering a sacrifice of fools, bringing something to him, thinking that that is what he wants, not knowing that it is wrong.

If she had paused long enough to listen, she might have understood, mightn't she, that Jesus was not there to be served, but to serve. Not there to receive from them, but to give to them.

Not there to slot into their agenda, but to give them his agenda. Friends, Jesus isn't here to be ignored by us in our busyness.

A glance over now and then to check that he's still there waiting, or sorry, I've not spoken in a while. He is here to see us. He's here to see us.

[13 : 38] He's here to speak with us. Who are we to keep the Lord waiting? He wants us to come near, ready to hear, ready to listen, ready to receive from him what he has to give and say.

And we have to be wise enough to recognize that we are not ready to hear him unless we make ourselves ready. Our world does not prepare us to listen to God.

And our hearts are not hardwired to listen to God. So you hear it again, take care. Take care, says the teacher, to listen.

Shema to Shema. Ah. Next year, we're going to have a visit from ministers and elders from other congregations in our presbytery.

There's going to be a questionnaire sent out. And one of the questions that you are going to be asked is this, what preparation do you make before attending the worship services?

[14 : 40] What preparation? Maybe you've never thought about it. In another congregation my friend is in, they did this recently. He said lots of people wrote that they didn't understand the question.

Do we? What preparation? Does it matter what we do before we come to church on a Sunday or what it is that we talk about on the way here? You hear some good questions to ask ourselves on a Sunday.

Is what we do, talk about, listen to, getting us in the right mindset to listen to God? Is it quietening our hearts?

Is it getting us excited about what is going to happen when the preacher says, this is the word of God? This is the word of God. Let me say, this is keeping the Sabbath at its best.

When I spoke with David Meredith on his podcast, he called it something like dynamic Sabbatarianism. The more I think about it, the more I think that it is just plain biblical Sabbatarianism.

[15 : 43] Maybe you endured Sunday as a child. Freedom has a way of converting itself into rules and legalism in our hearts, doesn't it?

It could be a real burden to us, couldn't it, to think, I have to get Sunday lunch ready on Saturday. Or it could be a real burden to think, I have to find time in my week to catch up with my work or go to work.

But friends, wisdom says, making those choices freely for yourself can free you to worship God on a Sunday in a whole new way.

To come to church with your heart calm, open, and hungry to hear God's word rather than clogged up, distracted, and busy with life.

You take the day-to-day busyness away and don't replace it with anything, and Sunday does become a nightmare. Put day-to-day life on the shelf for a day and replace it with Bible study and prayer, family worship, coming together to worship God with your church, inviting people back to your house for a long lunch, getting out and going for a walk in God's creation, coming back to worship God at night, and it is a day full of time for what?

[17 : 14] Time for God and his people. Quality time with God and his people. If time with God and his people is a burden to us, we have other problems.

But I don't think that that is a problem for many of us. I suspect most of us would love more or better time with God, and it is a case of guarding the time that we do have, guarding our hearts to prepare ourselves for it, guarding our steps when we go to the house of God.

We could ask the same of our devotional times in the week, couldn't we? When, how we choose to open our Bibles, are we coming at it at a time and in a way that actually helps us to take in what it is that we're looking at?

Let's take care when we come to God that that is what we're doing, that we're coming near to listen. And secondly, says the teacher, let's be sure that we are slow to speak.

Slow to speak. Now, don't worry, we're not actually going to take that long over every single verse of our reading because the next six verses are really just the other side of the coin from verse one because the teacher says our words are where that worship war inside us spills out into the world.

[18 : 41] Now, in the context of the passage, verse two isn't saying that we shouldn't pray or we shouldn't sing. It is saying listen carefully, then speak carefully.

Listen carefully, then speak carefully. Now, if you've ever wondered why our service is as it is on a Sunday, this is essentially why.

Who speaks first in our service? Well, God begins our service. We hear his word in a call to worship. Then we sing. Then we pray.

Then what? We hear from God again in the reading of his word. Then we sing. Then we pray. And we hear from God again in the preaching of his word. Then we pray.

Then we sing. And God gets the last word in the benediction. We slow down. We listen. Then we speak. Now, that's only a couple of hours, one day a week.

[19 : 40] You say, why does it matter? Well, because if what we do on a Sunday sets the tone for the week, then what happens in the service sets the tone for our Sunday.

And we even try, Donald and I, to focus what we read and what we sing in the service around the preaching of God's word so that the preaching shapes the service, shapes the day, shapes the week.

So that God's word is like a stone thrown into the water of your life that sends out ripples across the whole of your existence. That is what the Christian week is.

That is why those battles I mentioned at the start over the light switch and over the mic are important. They're not the war, but they are battles. It's not just what style of worship we prefer, but the principle behind it.

That God should get to do as much, if not more, speaking in our service than we do. And that we should actually be able to see what he's saying in front of us. And that we should get ready to hear him rightly by praying and singing what we pray and sing and read.

[20 : 52] So what are the battles in our words then for us? Well, we don't have open warfare in our church on a Sunday, do we? We can all be thankful for that. You should know that as elders we do talk regularly about our worship on a Sunday, about the prayers, the singing, the preaching series.

Occasionally the structure and the content. None of it is tradition for tradition's sake. We think it through because we want our time with God and our church family to be as good as it can be on a Sunday.

But what about us personally? Well, this is where these verses bite a bit harder for us, I think. How does the worship war in our heart show in our words?

Well, in a church like ours, when we know the right words to say, it's easy to pretend that we're listening, even when we have stopped listening perhaps a long time ago.

Because what the teacher is getting at is trying to talk over God with right-sounding words to disguise the fact that we're not really listening to what he's saying. Have you ever had a conversation like that?

[22 : 08] somebody who's doing 99% of the talking and agreeing with everything that you're saying, but you can't actually get a word in. And when you do, you can't finish a sentence because they're enthusiastically agreeing with what you're saying before you've even said it.

So how can you possibly be agreeing with what I'm saying when I'm not being allowed to speak? That's the conversation happening in verse 2. Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God.

God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few. You're using a lot of good words, says God, but you're not letting me speak.

It sounds crazy, but we do do this, don't we? We treat God as if he was someone that we could trick into thinking that we're listening when we're not. But God is in heaven, says the teacher, and you are on earth.

Those words should make us pause when we come to him, should make us think before we speak. He's eternal, you're a breath.

[23 : 17] He is infinite, you are dust. He knows the end from the beginning. We can't work out what he's doing from beginning to end. Do we really think this is somebody that we can convince with right-sounding words that we love him if our hearts are not in it?

Verses four to seven pick up that idea of hypocrisy. Don't make a promise to God and then not follow through you. You're no good spending words saying that you will do something in the moment then putting it off or saying it was a mistake.

If you vow to do it, he says do it. But then the teacher gives us the wisdom that Jesus would give us so many years later. Better not to make a vow at all than to make one and not fulfill it.

Do not let your mouth lead you into sin. And now vows were permitted in the Old Testament but not commanded. So why would you make a vow when you didn't have to?

Better that you actually do what you're going to promise to do without vowing than that you vow to do it and then don't do it. The hypocrisy of empty words he's saying is worse than not saying anything in the first place.

[24 : 32] So before you say anything to God he says remember that God is in heaven and you are on earth. Here's wisdom himself the Lord Jesus in Matthew chapter 5 I tell you do not swear an oath at all either by heaven for it is God's throne or by the earth for it is his footstool or by Jerusalem for it is the city of the great king.

And do not swear by your head you cannot make even one hair white or black. All you need to say is simply yes or no anything beyond this comes from the evil one.

Friends what is he saying? In the presence of God we should be slow to speak. Slow to speak. Jesus teaches us doesn't he to keep our prayers simple.

Not using many words keep it responsive to what you're reading what you're listening to or hearing in his word. There is no point in us drowning God out or pretending that we're interested in what he's saying.

It doesn't work. When we come to God friends he gets to do the talking. He gets to make the promises. He gets to tell us what he wants.

[25 : 52] And then we respond in prayer to his word his promises his will. We do not control him with our prayers. We submit to him in prayer. I wonder if you can recognize this.

One writer says verse 3 is a symptom of an overproductive heart. The teacher is saying a dream is like many words both of the overflow of a heart laden with cares a busy heart which for the teacher is a foolish heart.

How often are our prayers the overflow of our own busyness and distraction rather than the reflection of and response to what God has said.

When life is not the way we want it how much of our prayer time is spent bringing a dream to God and asking for him to make it true? Or praying again and again and again the same list of requests every day because we imagine that every prayer is topping up our thermometer or keeping up our own broken streak and we may get to a hundred or the unknown number that God is going to say right you've made it now I'm going to give you what it is that you've been asking for all this time.

What does the teacher say? Much dreaming and many words are meaningless. A breath. To love God is to fear him.

[27 : 22] To listen to what he has to say before we say what we have to say. To put him on the throne and put us at his feet.

So how do you know this week how do I know how do we know that he is winning the worship war in our hearts? The teacher says this is how we know when we come near to listen first and only then to speak.

That's only the beginning but what is at the beginning of? the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

The right worship of God with the right heart is the root of all right thinking living speaking loving the Lord our God says wisdom.

We've heard the teacher's wisdom filled out by Christ our wisdom tonight. He who himself draws us near to God who brings us near to him who is the living word of God who is himself the way the truth and the life.

[28 : 38] He is how we come and he has spoken and so friends let us come humbly to God through him to love and to worship him by praying and singing in response to what it is that we've heard tonight.

Let's come to him in prayer together. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray.