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Is It Better for Christians to Worship in an Economical Space or a Beautiful One?

January 5, 2023



#STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about whether Christians are obligated by Matthew 6:19 to meet in the most practical, economical space possible and whether playing music too beautifully during worship can actually become a distraction.

* Are Christians obligated by Matthew 6:19 to meet in the most practical, economical space possible, or is it preferable to construct buildings like cathedrals that are outwardly beautiful and reflect God's glory?

* At what point does playing music beautifully during worship actually become a distraction?

Transcript

[Music] [Bell] I'm Amy Hall, I'm here with Greg Koukl and you're listening to Stand to Reason's #STRask podcast. Hi Amy. Hi Greg.

You know, I don't mention this too often, but if you're listening to this episode and you'd like to go back in time and hear everything we've done, because I don't think the podcast, list will go back more than maybe a year. If you go to our website at str.org, you can hear all the way back to the beginning of this, which I think was in 2016, possibly even a little bit earlier. Yeah, right, right, right.

That's when Melinda and I were doing it and we did that for about a year and then you took over. That's right. So if you're enjoying these and you'd like to hear earlier ones, go to our website, str.org. We also have articles and... Oh, kinds of fun stuff.

Yeah, lots of videos. And by the way, where did you mention where exactly, how would they find the backlog of podcasts as they are asking? So on our website, you'll see on the top navigation bar, you'll see podcasts. So you just click on that and go to #STRask.

Oh, so the whole log is... Yes, and you'll see all the archives there. Great. All right, Greg,

let's take a question from Brandon Roerig.

Okay, yeah, let's start with this one, sure. "When considering church buildings, are Christians obligated by Matthew 619 to meet in the most practical, economical space possible? Or is it preferable to construct buildings like cathedrals that are outwardly beautiful and reflect God's glory?" Well, let's deal with the first, the verse first because I don't think the verse is related to this issue. In other words, I don't think we can press the verse into service regarding this issue.

What was the verse then, Greg, can you just... It's Matthew 619. And here's what Jesus said. This is the sermon on the Mount.

He says, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal." And then by contrast, next verse, "But rather, store up for yourselves treasures in heaven where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal." And what Jesus is saying is the true wealth is the wealth that endures. If you look in the passages just before it, he's giving instruction about not parading your spirituality, your apparently righteous behavior towards other people, and before other people rather. And the immediate antecedent to the passage I just read, he's talking about fasting, but he talks about giving and giving alms and that kind of stuff.

He says, "Don't be doing that. Don't be parading it. You should be fasting.

You should be giving alms, but not for the purpose of gaining the approval of other people and helping them to see how spiritual you are." And what Jesus says is, "If you do that, that's your reward. You have reward and full." And then people say, "What's that reward?" Well, then people think, "Oh, look at how fancy Shmanci he is. He's really spiritual or she's really spiritual." Okay.

All right. That's what you get. You get human approval.

But God isn't going to approve of that because it's done with the wrong motives. And this is where Jesus comes in. By contrast, what you want is not your treasures on earth like human approval was the immediate context, but treasures in heaven.

God's approval because that's never going to be taken away from you. You're going to have that forever, not just the temporary stuff that you get from human beings. So that is the sense here.

He's not saying we shouldn't be spending money extravagantly to buy things on this earth. Now, there may be reasons not to do that, but that's not what Jesus is talking about. And he's not talking about not saving your treasure in the bank or your holdings because the Book of Proverbs expresses clearly in a number of places.

The value and the wisdom of doing that. And then in other places, James, for example, the rich are not disparaged for being rich. They're disparaged for how they use their money and how they treat other people.

And there are many rich people in the New Testament, Joseph of Arimathea, the Gospels. Matthew, excuse me, his problems were wealth was ill-gotten through extortion in the taxing system. So that's the Matthew 6 passage.

Now, the question then is about building big buildings. And there's a stewardship question that's legitimate here. People need a place to worship.

And that costs money. And there are facility requirements for effective Christian community. That costs money.

And I think it's really clear as we see the temple being built in the Old Testament that God cares about beauty. And in fact, there are people that were filled with the Holy Spirit specifically to make the temple beautiful. Francis Schafer talks about this.

And God cares about beauty. Okay, so there are appropriate roles of all of that making our decisions about a building where we're all going to gather. Keep in mind also that the ancient cathedrals we think in Europe in particular, because they're the best examples.

These were built mostly for the aggrandizement of the ruling class or the priestly class or whatever. They were built as homages to God himself. They wanted to build something noble.

And so they were built in the middle of town and they were big structures. I think of the one in Strasbourg I've been to many times in the eastern part of France rather. And this took hundreds of years to build.

It took multiple generations of commitment to build this big Gothic cathedral and it's magnificent. Okay, and part of it, the idea was to display something glorious on earth for people to behold. It wasn't just a place to gather, but when it got to this stage of architecture, the light coming through the windows and the mosaics and all that were meant to communicate things to people who were not exactly literate.

So it was meant for spiritual education and glorification of God. Now I think it got out of hand in some cases and I just went by the other day. What used to be called the Christal Cathedral in Orange County.

I thought it was Disneyland actually when I drove by the freeway. Oh, there's Disneyland on it. Then I look more closely at everything's lit up.

I said, oh, no, that's the Christal Cathedral because they're very close to each other. Sometimes, of course, this can get out of hand when this particular place was built many

idea of adding beauty to your worship space is a really good thing, especially something that you're able to.

If you're able to, something that would communicate reverence for God. So people understand who it is we're worshipping. And John Mark Reynolds said something one time that has stuck with me.

And he mentioned the fact that when the woman in the Gospels took that flask of perfume and broke it over Jesus, who was the person who complained about that? That was Judas. It was Judas. Judas had a problem with spending this money on the glory of Jesus.

And Jesus actually said, as long as this Gospels preached, people will remember her for this glorious thing that she's done. Right. So this idea of spending money for honoring the beauty of God, I think, is something completely legitimate.

And also what came to mind was Luke 16, the parable of the steward, where in the end Jesus says to the disciples, "Use your money to create friends for the kingdom of heaven and then you'll welcome them in." And he says, "The people who are of the world use their money very shrewdly, but we're not doing that. We need to do that. We need to use our money to strategically to bring people into the kingdom." So not only does this bring glory to God, but it's also a way of communicating to others who God is.

So I think there are a lot of ways that this is really valuable. And again, just spending the money isn't what makes the difference. As you noted, you can see something that was really expensive and it won't communicate any of those things about God.

But if we're intentional about it, I think it's valuable. By the way, this is a big issue I have with a lot of worship, just the beauty. I don't think a lot of worship nowadays is beautiful.

It just isn't. It's popular singers do these songs, but it's not harmonious. It's hard to follow.

There's no melody that is engaging. The language doesn't move me. I don't want to get it a bit screed on this, but I think that's a problem with worship.

What has happened to worship is it's lost much of its beauty. And we've lost a sense of reverence. Now, you think about, and that could have something to do with the spaces we're in.

Because most people, I don't know if it's most people, but a lot of people are attending churches that the churches are fairly new. They don't really have a space in LA. Industrial areas.

There aren't a lot of options here in LA when people start new churches. So a lot of these

places will be in a strip mall or whatever. So that doesn't make it more difficult.

But just think if we were in a space that communicated that reverence, you probably that would probably work itself out even in the worship. And the way people worship. Because you think about probably some things you've experienced in terms of worship and try to imagine that happening in a cathedral.

And you really can't because it doesn't match. So I think we could do with a little more reverence. Yeah.

And no disparaging strip malls or industrial site churches. My own churches in an industrial site. But sometimes that is much better than a big capital project of building a big building if it's not necessary.

So that can be very wise. But even in those areas, steps can be made and taken to make it more beautiful in the sense that we're talking about to inspire a richer engagement with God during worship. It's worthwhile.

I think that's the bottom line. It's worthwhile to make it beautiful. And like you said, Greg, I think I mentioned this earlier too.

There aren't a lot of options here in LA when people start new churches. So I think a lot of people listening are in these situations. That's okay.

I'm not saying that you can't worship there. Hey, some of them started tents. Calvary Chapel Coast to Mesa was a tent for a long time.

Yeah. Back in the early 70s. But just look around for something you can do, something you can do to communicate that beauty and reverence.

All right, Greg. Well, what you said about worship leads directly into our next question. Okay.

This one comes from Justin Weaver, not Bieber. Thanks for clarifying Justin. All right.

Recently, you discussed worship slash praise music. I'm one who plays an instrument in a praise team and I never seek it. But sometimes people make comments that they liked my playing.

And I wonder at what point does playing music beautifully actually become a distraction to worship? Well, I have thought a lot about this, but the reason I'm pausing is because precisely the way the question was asked. At what point does playing music beautifully become a distraction to worship? And I guess this depends a lot on the person who's playing the music. He's qualified the music as beautiful music.

So I'm taking that at face value. Maybe different people have different ideas of what

beautiful is. But I actually think most of us have a general sense of beauty as opposed to something we like.

We might listen to something and just get into it and, you know, whatever, do our thing and be it. Well, we wouldn't say that it's beautiful music. We'll just say that's good music or we'd like that music or that's energetic or whatever.

Okay, that's different than beautiful. Okay. Beautiful is in a different category.

And I think most of us would recognize that's the case, whether it's contemporary music for Christians. There could be beautiful contemporary music for Christians. I think it's fairly rare personally now.

And the older music and classical music, I think, is endured because of its beauty. I do not think beautiful music is distracting. I think performers are distracting.

Okay. And that, and I'm using that word advisedly because if they're performing, if it's a performance, perform. If you're leading worship, the worship leader, all the worship leader wants to do, needs to do, and should be doing is leading.

In other words, helping people to get absorbed in the beautiful music and lyrics that are an expression of worship for God. You want the, and I even said this to, we have a great worship team that's doing reality for us now. First time that the same team is traveling with us.

And I told them sometimes I wish the worship team was in the back of the church, not the front of the church because they're often distracting. They can be distracting by doing these little creative things with their voice. Whoa, whoa, whoa, you know, whatever that is.

Well, if you're performing fine, you don't do that because nobody can follow that. And immediately your attention goes off of the experience that you're absorbed in. And all of a sudden you're thinking about, oh, wait, it's a disruption.

Okay. You want to sing the songs that people can follow so that they don't get distracted by the worship leader. Okay.

And those are the kinds of distractions with music that I think interfere with a, at least for me, a rich worship experience. I don't want to be aware of performers. I want to be led into a musical experience of sorts that I can participate in because the music and the lyrics are both things.

And the lyrics are both something I can follow. I could do. And they are beautiful and they're Christo centric or theocentric.

They're not a celebration of my feelings. And by the way, that's a huge thing. If people

were candid with themselves, most of the songs in a church service that talk about the singer's feelings are not authentic for the singer.

The singer's not feeling those things that they're singing about. The song is meant to produce the feelings, not to reflect the feelings. I would not.

I don't want to sing about myself and about my feelings. I want to sing about God. Now, of course, in the Psalter and the Bible, the book of Psalms, you have expressions and feelings that isn't illicit, but there are expressions and feelings there because that's the way the Psalm writer was feeling.

And I think that's a distractive element. In fact, I don't sing songs with lyrics that I can't say, honestly. And so a lot of them I just sit out and I pray, you know, maybe hum along or something, but I don't affirm the lyrics.

So I think to the question then of Justin, not Bieber, but to his question, if it's beautiful music, then I don't think that's a problem unless there are elements of the execution of that music that are distracting to the worshipper and takes them out of the beauty of the moment. I listened to for a long time, I listened to classical music. And I have a favorite piano, rock bottom off piano concerto number two.

It's a very romantic piece. And I loved listening to it because there's no lyrics. It's all I get immersed in the kind of the affective element of the same thing with with opera because I don't speak Italian.

So I could just get immersed in that and not be distracted. And so by these other things, and this I think is a virtue of beautiful music in a worship and setting. We have lyrics and stuff, but we want them to usher us into a worshipful attitude and not distract us from that.

And if a leader is performing in a way that distracts or does music that most people can't follow for whatever reason, then they're not leading. How do you know they're not leading because people are following, they're distracted. Greg, I think that's a really good distinction that you've made here between beauty and performance.

And I think maybe another way of expressing that is if you're trying to create beauty that's different from trying to draw attention to yourself. So as you are focusing on yourself, yeah. And of course, there are different kinds of music that could be involved here.

There's the kind where you're leading the congregation in singing. And then there's a kind where you're just up there playing music during the prelude or perhaps during communion or whatever it is. And in those cases, you want to make your music as beautiful as possible, not in a way that draws attention to you.

And I think this is something that I'm not sure I can put into words, but I think the way you described it, Greg, I think people will get an idea of what that means. And it's something as a performer you can just be concentrating on. I want to make this as a performer too.

You're a flautist flautist. Yes. And I actually, there are many times when we'll be playing and because of the beauty, I just worship God because the beauty just moves me to worship.

So I think I know what that can be like. And I think most performers do know the difference between trying to draw attention to themselves and focusing on creating something beautiful. Now think about like Handel's Messiah.

Nobody in there is going to say, "That's too beautiful and now I'm not thinking about God." Right. Right. It's the opposite.

It's the absolute opposite. So I thought that was a great distinction, Greg. By the way, I already raised this concern, but I just want to make the observation that the vast majority of the songs that are sung now, and if you're a worship leader or involved in that at all, I hope you're listening closely.

The vast majority is a celebration of individual feeling, not against feeling. No problem there. Okay.

It isn't the way the older hymns were written by and large. But why are we celebrating individual feeling? And my concern, a lot of times they're not feelings people are experiencing anyway when they're there. People are dragging in in the morning and they're not thinking, "No, no, no, no." You know, they're not going along with all that kind of stuff.

And a lot of people are sad. Okay. Now, hopefully genuine worship will be uplifting.

But why is it focused on the individual feeling? I'll tell you why, because this is the core ethic of this culture. It's all about the feeling. So we shouldn't be surprised being immersed in the culture when that kind of stuff creeps aggressively and thoroughly into our worship.

And that's the concern I have. The centrality of that focus in so much of what passes for worship. And there are appropriate places for expressing feelings.

And we see these kinds of things, like I said, in the Psalter of the Jews. However, I think it's way overdone. It has really imported a very worldly ethic into our worship.

And it makes it hard for me to worship a lot of churches and I'm in a lot of churches. And I end up sitting and bowing my head and spending that time praying. So I'm with the

Lord of close to the Word, but I'm not usually being led in worship.

And that's what really my heart desires. All right. Thank you, Greg.

Thank you, Justin and Brandon. If you have a question, send it to us on Twitter with the hashtag #STRAsk or you can go through our website. Just go to our podcast page.

Look for #STRAsk and you'll find a link there to send us your question. We look forward to hearing from you. This is Amy Hall and Greg Kockel for Stand to Reason.

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