



The Skillful Worship Leader

Competency: Create regular habits of practice that sharpen leadership, musicianship, communication, and technology skills.

Assignments

1. Read Psalm 33:1–3, 1 Chronicles 15:22, and 1 Chronicles 25:7 and answer the questions that follow.
2. Read the Article: *My Hands: What Do I Practice?* by Bob Kauflin and answer the questions that follow.
3. Lead a song for a worship service and review the recorded video with your worship mentor. Was anything distracting? Were you well-prepared musically? If you led a transition, what was good about it, or what can you improve on?
4. Practice your instrument 30 minutes a day for the next two weeks focusing on your weak areas (e.g. difficult strum patterns while singing, eliminating string buzz while switching chords, etc.) Begin forming this habit.
5. Get a metronome app on your phone and practice playing and singing with it during the week. Use it during your daily commute or at down times during the day.

Psalm 33:1–3, 1 Chronicles 15:22, 1 Chronicles 25:7

1. What is the purpose of playing skillfully according to Psalm 33:1–3?
2. How does knowing that God cares deeply about musical excellence inform your own preparation and current skill level?
3. List 2–3 principles from these passages that can be applied to your own habits of preparation.



MY HANDS: WHY DO I PRACTICE?

By Bob Kauflin

Meet Joe, the new worship leader for Crosstown Community Church. Joe is fictional, but you might recognize some of his qualities.

Joe works forty-five hours a week as a software engineer but still spends between five and ten hours preparing for Sunday morning. A lot of that time is given to reading Scripture, studying notes from the pastor's previous message, and praying for the church. Late Saturday night you'll usually find him poring over songs for the next morning.

Joe really wants to be used by God to help people grow in their love for him.

But things haven't been going too well. Last Sunday he forgot to tune his guitar. Again. After two verses it sounded so bad the pastor came up and asked the team to start over. During the third song, Joe remembered the team hadn't practiced going from the chorus to the verse. After a minor train wreck, the piano player finally got them on track.

Every week Joe fumbles through chords, misses cues, and forgets words. When others suggest he could grow in his abilities, Joe shakes his head and smiles. He's sure worship is about the heart, not trying to play everything perfectly. He thinks loving God and knowing him through his Word are all he needs.

The congregation wouldn't agree. They think Joe needs skill. And their worship of God is being hindered by Joe's lack of it.

Skill is the ability to do something well. It's related to qualities like expertise and competence. We can tend to under value it, like Joe, or idolize it, like we do in professional musicians and athletes. But rightly understood and pursued, skill can mark the difference between ineffectiveness and fruitfulness in our leading. It can contribute to, or hinder people from, engaging with God. That's why we should make it a priority.

While God can work through us in spite of our mistakes, incompetence, and lack of preparation, he commends skill and uses it for his glory. When Moses had to find men to oversee the construction of the tabernacle, he didn't pass around a sign-up list. He chose craftsmen whom God had gifted with "skill and intelligence" (Exodus 36:1). When David looked for a Levite to lead singing, he picked Kenaniah "because he was skillful at it" (1 Chronicles 15:22, NIV). Under divine inspiration, David wrote that musicians are to "play skillfully on the strings" (Psalm 33:3), and David himself, as king over the people, "guided them with his skillful hand" (Psalm 78:72). In the New Testament, Paul referred to himself as "a skilled master builder" (1 Corinthians 3:10). Skill matters to God. It should matter to us too.



FIVE THINGS TO REMEMBER ABOUT SKILL

But simply valuing skill isn't sufficient. We need a theologically informed understanding of skill so that we can pursue it in a way that pleases God.

Here are five principles to keep in mind as we seek to become more competent in what God has called us to do.

1. Skill is a gift from God meant for his glory.

None of us can claim credit for any ability we possess. As Paul asked the Corinthians, "What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it" (1Cor. 4:7)? I remember having a conversation with a guy in college who was having trouble understanding why God should get any glory for his musical gifts. He reasoned that God wasn't the one sitting in a practice room for hours on end. He didn't understand grace, which provides not only our gifts, but the strength, ability, and endurance to develop them. That's why our skill is meant to direct people's eyes to God, not us. As my good friend C.J. Mahaney said, "Every gift from God is meant to direct our attention to God and create fresh affection for God."

2. Skill has to be developed.

Michael Jordan was one of the greatest basketball players of all time. For years he was the standard that every other basketball player aspired to. But few of them ever came close. Why? Because the mind-boggling stats that Jordan and other greats achieve is due to practicing harder, longer, and more comprehensively than every other player. They take the time to develop the skill God gave them. They realize that skill isn't perfection. It can just look that way to us. Likewise, the greatest musicians have put in countless hours listening, practicing riffs and scales, playing with others, and honing their craft. The goal of practice isn't doing something until you get it right. It's practicing until you can't get it wrong.

3. Possessing skill doesn't make me better than someone else.

I mean this in two ways. First, I can be skilled in an area but someone else can be more skilled. That doesn't mean I'm not effective in an area. It just means my best might not be as good as someone else's average. Second, while God values skill, he doesn't accept us on the basis of it. So even if I can play complex chord progressions, write songs like Matt Redman, or have a four octave vocal range, I still need the atoning work of the Savior to make my offering of worship acceptable (1 Pet. 2:5).

4. Skill should be evaluated by others.

Even though I've been leading worship for over thirty years now, I still can't always tell if what I'm doing is helpful or where I need to grow. I thank God for feedback I get during rehearsal and after a meeting. Is that arrangement working? Did I sing that chorus too many times? Was I clear? Did I play too much (to which the answer is almost always yes)?



We need the eyes and ears of those around us. It's both humbling and helpful to hear back from people we trust who will speak the truth to us.

5. Skill isn't an end in itself.

Skill can easily become our ultimate goal and focus. At that point it often becomes an idol. We spend more and more time rehearsing and get impatient when others make mistakes. We minimize spiritual preparation and devote ourselves entirely to musical issues. We evaluate the failure or success of any meeting solely on right tempos, in tune vocals, and well executed plans. Which are all good things. They're just not the ultimate values. Years ago I read a pastor comment that "God isn't looking for something brilliant; he's looking for something broken." That's a biblical perspective to keep in mind as we seek to develop our gifts.

WHAT SKILLS HELP US DO

A divine perspective on skill will both motivate us to develop skill and protect us from exalting it. That's because God wants us to be skillful for specific reasons. Here are just a few.

1. Skill Helps Us Focus on God

I've been asked numerous times, "How can you concentrate on worshiping God while you're leading others?"

Becoming more skillful is part of the answer. The more comfortable I am with practical aspects of leading, the more I can think about the One to whom I'm singing. I focus on developing skill so I'll be able to focus more on God. Additionally, my lack of skill can tempt people to be distracted, confused, and potentially irritated. I might be worshiping God, but I'm not doing all I can to help everyone else join me.

2. Skill Helps Us Serve the Church

God gives us gifts so that we can "serve one another" (1 Peter 4:10). How do we serve one another? By leading clearly so people aren't wondering what words to sing next or what the melody is. By using fresh arrangements that aren't distracting.

And by possessing a calm and joyful countenance that expresses the hope in the God we're singing about. "Those who look to him are radiant" (Psalm 34:5). If I'm trying to remember the lyrics to verse 2, how to play aB7sus, or how the bridge melody goes, I'll have a hard time looking to the One I'm worshiping, and my face will be anything but radiant.

SKILLS TO DEVELOP

Our varied skills should function like the frame around a classic painting. If the frame is too



bold or extravagant, we'll hardly notice the picture it displays. On the other hand, if the frame is cheap, shabby, or marred, we'll wonder why such a masterpiece is surrounded by junk. The right frame complements the picture in all the right ways, directing our eyes to the brilliance of the artist, not to the frame.

John Piper calls the right balance “undistracting excellence.” It's a proficiency that doesn't draw attention to itself but rather points away from itself. We can pursue undistracting excellence in a number of areas.

1. Leadership

Perhaps the most neglected skill among worship leaders is leadership. We think, "I'm not a pastor, so I don't really have the responsibility for leading." But we do. And by God's grace we can be better leaders than we currently are. We can define our goals more clearly and pursue them more faithfully.

Do you have a plan and a purpose on Sunday morning, or do you walk in unprepared and unconcerned? Skilled leaders have a clear vision of what we've gathered to do. They enable us to see things we wouldn't see on our own. That may involve explaining why we're singing a certain song or making connections between a song and the sermon. It could also mean letting a song speak for itself.

Good leaders draw our attention to what's most important. They make choices that help us focus. That means I take responsibility for what people are getting out of a song and don't assume everyone is equally engaged or aware of what they should be thinking about. I try to minimize distractions and clear up confusion.

2. Musicianship

Being skilled musically involves different components. One is technique, which simply means mastering the mechanics or building blocks of a style. It's having the actual ability to play or sing whatever is required in a situation.

A second aspect of musicianship is theory—understanding how music works. Because music is made up of repeatable patterns and sounds, we can figure out what the interval of a fourth sounds like, what the minor 6 chord is in the key of D, and how to modulate from F to G. Musicians who don't understand music theory are lost if they have a memory slip during a song.

A third requirement in skilled musicianship is taste. Taste is knowing what fits. It comes primarily through listening to music purposefully and picking apart exactly what musicians are doing or not doing. Taste involves dynamics, phrasing, rhythmic patterns, voicings, and instrumentation. Probably the most challenging part of good musical taste is knowing what to leave out. Great musicianship is less about what you play and more about what you don't play.



Sometimes we try to grow in multiple areas of skill at once and become discouraged. Don't go down that path. Focus on one or two areas at a time.

How much should you practice? It depends on what else you do and what your goals are. At the very least you should be able to play the songs you need to play without any interruptions. But that's a minimum. A higher standard is to continually add to your skills so you can serve whatever needs arise.

3. Communication

You might think your primary means of communicating to others is music. Maybe you get tongue-tied when you try quoting a Bible verse, or you lose your train of thought trying to explain what a song means. So you end up defaulting to Christian phrases that sound "worshipful"-such as "Glory to God" or "Praise the Lord." Or maybe you're happy to say nothing at all and just let God speak through the songs.

Like all skills, speaking to others clearly and persuasively involves the hard work of preparation. We like to think spontaneous rambblings are more genuine than prepared thoughts, but that's hardly ever true.

When I arrived at Covenant Life, C.J. told me that if I wanted to grow in communicating effectively, I should write down what I wanted to say and keep it to a certain length. He assured me that the more I thought through my comments in advance, the more substantive they would be and the easier it would eventually be to prepare them. He was right.

4. Technology

Technology can help us communicate God's truth more clearly, or it can be a major hindrance to that end. It can be a valuable asset or a terrible taskmaster. The difference is in how skillfully we use it.

That means being familiar with current methods of transferring and downloading music (legal ones, of course), notating charts, using MIDI, producing music, amplifying sound, and projecting lyrics and images, to name a few.

If you don't have time to invest any study in this area, you can probably find people in the church who do. They don't have to be musicians. But they do need to understand they're more than techies. They're worshipers. They're using their gifts to help proclaim God's Word and celebrate the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Questions from the Article:

1. Of the five principles to remember about skill, which was the most challenging for you? Why?
2. John Piper speaks of "undistracting excellence" when it comes to the role of musical proficiency in worship. Describe some times you have observed a worship

