

Vain Worship

📖 Ecclesiastes 5:1-7

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Briefly, Ecclesiastes is a difficult book to interpret. Solomon wrote it toward the end of his life; he tried to live on both sides of the fence and he found the grass was not greener on the other side, and in fact, there was no grass over there. Living in unbelief or as a carnal believer does not have any lasting benefit.

Now last time in Ecclesiastes, we studied 4:9-12, which deals with the advantage of two over one. In 4:9 he says that when we work together we get a better return than when we work alone. In 4:10 he says that as far as travel is concerned, if one falls, the other can lift him up. But if we travel alone there is no one to lift up the fallen. In 4:11, if two lie down together they can keep warm, but if one is alone how can they keep warm. In 4:12, if one is alone he can easily be overpowered by an attacker, but two can resist an attacker. Logically it follows then that if two is better than one, then three is better than two. This reminded Solomon of the proverb; a cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart. It simply means that there is power in numbers, and while there are limits in the number of true friends we can have, three friends working together forms a very strong bond that is difficult to break. The application is that it is in keeping with divine wisdom to work together and build friendships. Some insist on being loners, and there are some advantages to that, but as they grow older they realize that the disadvantages outweigh the advantages. It's those who are investing in others and working alongside that develop true friendships. To go it alone is not in accordance with divine wisdom.

In 4:13-16 we studied how gaining popularity and power and prestige are really nothing more than temporal, fleeting vanity. In 4:13 a poor yet wise lad is said to be better off than an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to receive correction. In 4:14 the reason is given. The poor lad had come out of prison, almost as it were, to become a grand king, even though he was born poor in his own kingdom. He is an example of a man with humble beginnings who rose to great heights. Yet even this is fleeting, as 4:15 begins to indicate, early on a great many thronged to the side of the poor yet wise lad, cheering his praises. But in 4:16, as it turns out, there is no end to all the people and they changed their opinion. Even those who at first praised the lad turned against him. He lost his popularity, power and prestige very quickly. The point is that it is really a waste of time to be motivated by the desire for popularity, power and prestige. Just as soon as you have it, you lose it. Donald Glenn, in his commentary on Ecclesiastes summarized it this way, "The point of the passage seems to be that the desire

for prestige and advancement, two incentives which often motivate a person's labor, is, like envy and greed, futile or **meaningless** and **a chasing after the wind** (cf. 1:14, 17; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6; 6:9)."¹

Solomon has now taught us about the futility of independence and the futility of desire for popularity and prestige, so he now turns in Eccl 5 to teach us the futility of ritual worship, and he does so through the lens of speaking rash vows, making promises to God that if God will do this or that for you then you will do this. And the passage is evidently difficult because commentators disagree on whether this is how to worship or how not to worship. Now both get covered either way, but one approach is that Solomon is giving advice on proper worship, proper sacrifice, proper prayer and proper payment of vows. In this view the main intent is to give us good advice. But another approach is that Solomon is fundamentally giving us a warning against the folly of improper worship, where a person is just going through the motions and how this religious activity makes God angry so that He destroys the work of their hands, so that there is a net loss, and that's the vanity. And I think we do learn a bit about proper worship as a byproduct of the passage, but that the main intent is to warn against false worship.

In 5:1, **Guard your steps as you go to the house of God and draw near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools; for they do not know they are doing evil.** In the time of Solomon, **the house of God** was the temple in Jerusalem. This temple was designed by David and constructed by Solomon on the location it is thought that Abraham went up to offer Isaac as a sacrifice and God provided the ram as a substitute. Descriptively the temple was known as **the house of God** because that is what it is. The temple was God's house, and therefore more akin to a palace. When I think of the temple I always think of the palace of the King. It is where the King lives on earth. Of course, this does not mean that He is confined to earth. Even Solomon who built the palace, in the dedication said, "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain You, how much less this house which I have built!" God is infinite and cannot be confined. Even so, He set a visible sign of His dwelling among Israel in the earthly temple. It is interesting that one of God's major aims in history is to dwell among men. This is not a minor issue in Scripture. It is a major issue. He dwelled with Adam and Even in the garden until they sinned and were cast out of the garden. He made a way to approach Himself through the sacrifice of a lamb. This situation remained until God led them out of Egypt by means of a fire by night and a cloud by day. This fire and cloud were known as the Shechinah Glory. Shechina comes from shakan which means "to dwell." God dwelled with them in the visible manifestation called Shechinah Glory. At Mt Sinai God gave instruction on how to build the tabernacle. The tabernacle was built under Moses' supervision and when completed the Shechinah Glory moved into the Most Holy Place where He was enthroned above the cherubim. This is how He dwelled among them. When it was time for the Israelites to break camp, Shechinah would depart from the tabernacle and the Israelites would pack up camp and follow Him wherever He led. Eventually Solomon built a more permanent structure in Jerusalem called the temple, here referred to as the house of God, and what I consider His palace. This is where God chose to dwell among them and this is where all Jews had to come to draw near to God. They could not worship God wherever they were.

They had to worship God in Jerusalem at the temple. It was very different from the way things are now. And that brings to mind Jesus' discussion with the Samaritan woman, when He told her, "woman, believe Me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father... But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth" (John 4:21, 23). But during OT times, one had to go to Jerusalem and you had to go up to the temple in order to worship God and that worship was only acceptable through the various sacrifice. But even that was not enough, one had to approach God carefully. In 5:1 Solomon is giving a warning, saying, **Guard your steps as you go to the house of God.** In other words, watch the way you are approaching God. He is God you know. He is a great King and you don't approach a great King just however you want. When Moses saw the bush burning but it wasn't burning up he approached the bush and God said, "Do not come near here; remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." The point is that God is holy and man is sinful, and therefore there is only one way to approach Him. It's who He is that is the determinative factor in how we must approach Him and graciously He instructs us how to approach Him. So when one would **go to the house of God** he must **guard his steps**, meaning with the correct approach, according to His instruction.

Now unfortunately, worship is not taken too seriously in the Church today. While we don't have to worship Him in the temple in Jerusalem, but can worship Him from anywhere, it doesn't follow that we can worship Him however we want. We must worship Him in spirit and truth, just as Jesus said, which in the Greek is better translated, spiritual truth. That means that any worship that is offered that is not spiritual truth is not worship that is acceptable before God. Basically, the reason is because God is Spirit, not material, and so the offerings He accepts are spiritual offerings such as praise, prayer, offering ourselves to Him, but even then, we are given instruction on how each of these is to be done properly. Further, He can only be worshipped by spiritual people, that is, those who have the spiritual re-birth through faith. And then the spiritual worship offered must be in truth, that is, in the way that He has revealed He must be worshipped. And so all it does when people try to worship Him who are not even believers or in the wrong way, is it makes God angry. So the first thing these Israelites are told is to **guard your steps as you go to the house of God.** Approach God correctly. Otherwise He'll get angry.

The second thing they are told is to **draw near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools.** As they drew near the temple to go up, the priests would be teaching. Their instruction could be heard and should be heeded. The people were to **draw near to listen** to their teaching rather than offer sacrifice the wrong way. The word **listen** is *shama*. It could mean simply "to listen" rather than speak, but it can also mean "to attend to someone's words carefully," or "to hearken," in the sense of obey. Either could be correct, but either way they were to listen to the priests teaching and respond with obedience. Part of their teaching would be about how to approach the house of God. Since God is holy certain procedures had to be followed to avoid the consequences described later in the passage. Now they needed to heed the instruction rather than offer the **sacrifice of fools.** The **sacrifice of fools** is clearly defined in the following verses as taking a rash vow. Vows were a voluntary

sacrifice known as a votive offering. There was a way to do this and a way not to do this. Obviously, verse 4 says there are conditions involved, "When you make a vow to God, do not be late in paying it; for He takes no delight in fools." And verse 6 says, "Do not let your speech cause you to sin and do not say in the presence of the messenger of God that it was a mistake." The point is to be very careful how you offer the votive offering, that sacrifice must be made properly. It was not a thing to be taken lightly. To take it lightly was to take a rash vow. The end of verse 1 says they are a fool, **for they do not know they are doing evil**. The Hebrew word **fool** means "stupid" when it comes to practical things, but in the context of worship it means "insolent" or "contemptuous."

The picture of the fool is of someone who comes up to the palace of the great King and rather than listening carefully to the instruction of the priest about how to act in the house of the great King, he speaks and acts in a way that is contemptuous and insulting to the King. And even though **they do not know** this is **evil** it is still **evil**. What is the **evil**? In context it is robbing God of the reverence and honor that is due to Him. As the end of verse 7 says, "fear God." It is evil to not "fear God." Now Solomon was observing this as he saw people go up to the temple he had constructed and this is his warning against it.

Of course, by application, we see much of it going on today in Christ's church as well. Granted, we do not have to go up to a physical temple on earth to worship through sacrifice, but we do worship by offering spiritual sacrifices of praise, offering of ourselves to Him for service, good deeds and thanksgiving in the heavenly temple, which is really the real temple anyway. And yet many a believer does not act like they are entering into the presence of the King in the heavenly temple. Instead they praise with repetitious songs, they pray with repetitious prayers, they teach the Bible with agendas, they perform rock music, all as if it is pleasing to the King's ear, and mind you, this is going on in the King's heavenly palace. Now I've thought a lot about this over the years, and I really think that the litmus test for music in the local Church is the same as it is for exposition of the word and prayer, and that litmus test is whether God would appreciate it taking place in His heavenly palace, because that is where it is really taking place anyway. So we ask the question, is the prayer, the music or the exposition pleasing in God's house? It's funny that everyone has rules they consider proper in their own house, but somehow when it comes to how to conduct themselves in God's heavenly house, they think they can do whatever they want. And I'd say that the postmodern Church is so much like the fool in this verse who goes into the King's palace without listening to instruction on just how to do that, and marching into the King's presence, committing evil and insulting the King. From that you can see that it would have been better if he had never gone before Him.

In 5:2 Solomon gives another warning concerning vows. **Do not be hasty in word or impulsive in thought to bring up a matter in the presence of God. Word** and **thought** are the two areas of warning; what we say and what we think. As far as what we say, the concept of **being hasty in word** means speaking before thinking. How many people do this? They are a bunch of big mouths that do nothing more than demonstrate ignorance. One should never go into the house of God in Jerusalem blabbering his big mouth before thinking about what he is

saying. One should think before he speaks. But even that's not enough. The phrase **impulsive in thought** means "hurried in your mind." In other words, you may think about it but you don't really take enough time to think it through. And often when we do that we aren't thinking correctly. So when you bring up a subject in the **presence of God**, it's really something you never should have brought up. And these are hasty vows. Oh, if you do this for me, then I vow to do this, and so forth and so on. You might think about it a little more before you say something like that. The Bible is very clear on both word and thought.

Let's take an aside to the epistle of James. James has something to say about both thought and word. As far as **thought** is concerned, James 1:2 says "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you face trials." The word "consider" is from *ηγεομαι* and means "to lead with the mind." In other words, whenever you go into any situation, and James is talking about difficult trials, some hard thing in life, you should go into that situation with your mind, not with your emotions. Yet your emotions are what people tend to respond with and that just means undisciplined and unskilled in the word of God. You have to get past that. You have to train yourself to respond according to Bible doctrine in the mind and not with your emotions. Now when you do respond correctly, and this is a difficult situation, mind you, something frustrating, and yet the response is an attitude of joy. You have to train for that, train yourself not to be **impulsive in thought**. As far as **word** or speech is concerned, James 3:2ff argues that of all our body parts, one of the smallest ones, the tongue is the most difficult to command. It's an enigma. This tiny thing no one can control. He says it's very powerful too, because the tongue is like that very small rudder on a ship, and yet that tiny rudder directs the entire ship to its destination. He also says it is like the very small bit in the horse's mouth that enables the rider to control the entire horse. He says the tongue is a mystery how it can do all that, and likens it to a spark that sets a whole forest on fire. Try it sometime, try losing control with your tongue and see if your whole life doesn't blow up around you. You have to train yourself, discipline yourself to keep your pie hole shut.

Now Robin and I made a policy about speaking as little as possible, and this came out of what we learned just being in the ministry, that whenever you are talking to someone, try to be as brief as possible, try to be as concise as possible, don't just blabber and blabber and blabber, because we found that the more words you use the more likelihood there is going to be misunderstanding and confusion and gossip. So communication is very important, and accurate and precise communication is even more important. And it's obvious that some people don't have a clue in this area; they think there is such a thing as the spiritual gift of gab and they have it and they ought to share it with everyone. Well, first of all, it's not a spiritual gift, it's the flesh. These people think that if they haven't said 400,000 words a day they missed their goal or something. But according to biblical principles, that is a very dangerous way to live. It certainly is a dangerous way to act **in the presence of God**. You don't go and pray to God a million words, that's not going to help you get your prayer answered. That's just rambling. And you shouldn't do that when you exposit the word or when you sing songs. Just say what you have to say and move on. And yet, here in Ecc 5:2 we see Jews coming up to the palace of the King, where Shechinah Glory dwells, and they aren't thinking deeply about what they are saying, and so they are making all kinds of rash

vows, vows they can't keep and aren't intending to keep anyway. Well, don't think that won't be without consequence.

The end of 5:2 says, "**For God is in heaven and you are on the earth; therefore let your words be few.** Don't say a lot. Why? Because God is **in heaven and you are on earth.** It doesn't mean heaven contains God. Even the highest heaven can't contain Him. So what's the point? The Creator-creature distinction. We draw this diagram with God in an open box to show that He is infinite and man in a closed box to show that he is finite. And whenever we speak to God in prayer we should respect that Creator-creature distinction. That means it is foolish to blab on and on in prayer. God doesn't need to hear that. Think of it this way; if you were going into the White House to stand before the President, would you choose your words carefully or start blabbing? How much more important when you go into God's presence! And yet, when many Christians talk to God they are not careful at all. They flippantly say this and that. **Let your words be few** says Solomon. Don't blab to God. He doesn't want to hear all that. He is not impressed. He is angered. He would rather hear something carefully thought through, that you really intend to do.

In 5:3 Solomon makes a comparison between many dreams and many words. **For the dream comes through much effort and the voice of a fool through many words.** It's a little strange, but the word translated **effort** means "business, tasks, occupations" and since this is poetry it is probably metonymy for "cares" or "concerns." The meaning is that the person who dreams a lot is one who has too many cares or concerns. He is anxious all the time. That's why he's dreaming. Now I have always wondered about dreams. I don't personally remember many dreams, though I know that I dream because I occasionally will remember one. But apparently a person who dreams a lot is one who has too many cares or concerns. And this makes them anxious. Peter said you should let go of your concerns. "Cast your cares upon Him, for He cares for you." And the reason Solomon brings this up is to show a comparison between those with many dreams and those with many words spoken in prayer. The comparison is this; just as those who have too many concerns dream too much so those who are fools speak too many words to God. And in all that speaking they make rash vows they will never fulfill and never intend to fulfill. So, be quiet.

5:4 states what you must do when you have made a vow. **When you make a vow to God, do not be late in paying it; for He takes no delight in fools. Pay what you vow!** This verse does a pretty good job of describing the seriousness of a **vow** made **to God.** But what exactly is a **vow?** Turn to Numbers 30. A vow is an oath that is binding. Verse 2 says, "If a man makes a vow to the LORD, or takes an oath to bind himself with a binding obligation, he shall not violate his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth." So it's a binding obligation. And Solomon saw people not staying bound to their obligation. Turn to Deut 23:21, there's more. "When you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not delay to pay it, for it would be sin to you, and the LORD your God will surely require it of you." Even being late in payment was not keeping your obligation. And Solomon addressed that directly, saying, **do not be late in paying it.** Verse 22, "However, if you refrain from

vowing, it would not be sin in you. ²³You shall be careful to perform what goes out from your lips, just as you have voluntarily vowed to the LORD your God, what you have promised." So obviously, it is better to not make a vow than it is to make a vow and not keep it. But our point is to see the meaning of a vow and what it is a voluntary promise, and if you voluntarily promise something to the Lord then it is required that you fulfill it, and if not it was considered sin, and sin has consequences, whereas, if you didn't make a vow there could be no sin. For the last one turn to Lev 19:12. This is the one that the scribes and Pharisees keyed in on by NT times. They saw this verse and they manipulated it so they could take vows without any intent of ever keeping them. In verse 12 we read, "You shall not swear falsely by My name, so as to profane the name of your God; I am the LORD." In other words, they were not to take a vow in His name. So what did they do? How did they get around this? Turn to Matt 5:33. This is the section where He's contrasting what the Pharisees taught the law said, versus what it really said. Jesus says, "...you have heard that the ancients were told, "YOU SHALL NOT MAKE FALSE VOWS, BUT SHALL FULFILL YOUR VOWS TO THE Lord." ⁴But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King." What were they doing? They were making vows. And the way they would do it would be to swear by heaven, and they thought by this formula they were not obligated to keep the vow. Why not? Because they didn't invoke God's name. But Jesus reminds them that heaven is the throne of God. So to swear by heaven was to invoke His name. Others swore "by the earth" and so thought they were not obligated to keep the vow because it did not invoke God's name. But Jesus reminds them that earth is the footstool of God's feet. And so forth and so on. These people were fools. They thought they could play religious games and get away with it. They thought they could play little word games and get away with it. Jesus said they weren't getting away with a thing. They were disrespecting God and making Him angry. So Jesus says, that's it with the vows, just let your statement be. 'Yes, yes' or 'No, no'." In other words, just tell the truth all the time. There's no reason to add any kind of special words like "I promise" or "I swear," because all those statements do is undermine the truthfulness of the speaker anyway. They imply that some things they say are true and others are false. So just speak the truth at all times and be done with it.

Now we have a good example of someone who made a vow and kept it in Hannah, 1 Sam 1. Hannah had no son and she wanted a son. So she vowed the son to the Lord if he would give her a son, saying, "O Lord of hosts, if You will indeed look on the affliction of Your maidservant and remember me, and not forget Your maidservant, but will give Your maidservant a son, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life, and a razor shall never come on his head." Now the Lord did give her a son and when the son was born she named him Samuel, which means, "God hears." In other words, she named the son after the prayer of her vow. When she weaned him at three years of age she took him to the tabernacle at Shiloh and fulfilled the vow, turning him over to Eli the priest, who trained him in the priesthood. So here is a woman who made a vow and made good on the vow. That is the way it is to be done. But the fool speaks many vows and does not make good on the vows. And that is not a good thing, because God saw all this and God read their hearts and that's why it says in Eccl 5:5, **It is better**

that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. At least then you would not have sin, and once there is sin there are consequences.

And 5:6 shows the consequences. They are going to be worse off than before. **Do not let your speech cause you to sin and do not say in the presence of the messenger of God that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry on account of your voice and destroy the work of your hands?** You see, you don't come back and say, oh, I didn't really mean that. Really? Then you're just a liar. They're trying to get out of this, but there's no way out. You made a vow, you shouldn't do that rashly, but you did, and now you're stuck. And consequently when you don't come through you sin and God is going to destroy the work of your hands. So practically, you go to work and you plant this crop or build this building, whatever you do God would destroy it, it wouldn't be productive. So it would have been better to not vow anything at all, because then at least you could plant your crop and get a harvest or build your building and have it remain standing. But as it was with a vow having been made but not kept, the Lord would destroy it. There would be a net loss.

That's why 5:7 says, **For in many dreams and in many words there is emptiness.** That word **emptiness** is the theme of Ecclesiastes, "vanity." And the bottom line is Solomon is warning against the vanity of flippant worship. You shouldn't approach God flippantly because when you do there's going to be a net loss. It would be better if you never came to worship, because then you would not be sinning. But by doing so you are sinning and sin carries with it a heavy price tag. So rather than come with false worship, what should we do? Solomon says, **fear God.** What does that mean? It means to live as if you are in His presence. To live as if God is the main audience of your life. To live as if He is watching your every heart motive, your every thought. That would change how you respond to God.

And I fear that many local churches show no fear of God in how they gather for corporate worship. They sit around and drink coffee and have a discussion. They play the guitar and sing repetitive ditties. They hold hands, share stories and whip up some warm fuzzies. None of this is what they would do to show respect to the President in the White House. But when they go into the palace of the King in heaven this is what they do. That's why I've considered the teaching of the heavenly temple and the believers position seated in Christ in the heavenlies as expressed in Hebrews and Ephesians to be some of the least understood and least respected teachings in the Bible. Most have no connection with the positional truth that we are seated in the heavenlies in Christ Jesus and that we have access to God in His heavenly temple through Christ, and that we are really citizens there while aliens here so that what we are doing here is what we are doing there. And that's why how you conduct your service in the local assembly is very important. You cannot do just whatever you want or whatever feels right. The King in waiting has given us instruction in the Scriptures that is to be listened to and heeded. That's what verse 1 was all about. "Guard your steps as you go to the house of God and draw near" to hearken unto Him rather than offer a sacrifice of fools that only brings God's contempt and anger. You don't treat God that way in His house. And what I have done is try to draw a parallel between the earthly temple the

Jews would go to in Jerusalem and how they would correctly do that, with the spiritual temple the Church goes to in heaven and how that should be done correctly. And I think the parallels of worship and the temple between OT and NT are abundantly taught in the Scriptures, and therefore, there are valid applications of these principles to how the Church worships. So there is a right way to do it, and it is in accordance with the fear of God, and that means drawing in the concept that what we do here is being done in the heavenly temple. And that makes us ask whether we should be doing it that way or not.

In summary, in 5:1 the Jew was to approach God carefully, listening to the teaching of the priests concerning how to offer votive sacrifices, which are vows. For in coming without heeding the teaching of the priests, they were doing evil, even though they did not know it. In 5:2, do not be quick to speak or impulsive in thought so that you would bring up a matter in the presence of God that should not be brought up. God wants you to think about it first, not just start flapping your jaws. God is the Creator; you are the creature. Think about what you are saying and frankly, don't say much, certainly don't vow much. In 5:3 the comparison between the one who has many concerns as manifested by dreams is similar to how one who speaks so much is a fool. In 5:4, let's say you do make a vow, make sure and fulfill it. It makes God angry when you don't. And when it really comes down to it, in 5:5, it's better to not vow than it is to vow and not keep it. In 5:6 the tongue is a dangerous weapon. Don't wag it about making vows to God you'll never keep. That's just sin and you can't get around it. Why let your tongue do this? It's only going to get you in trouble and be the worse off for you, as God destroys the work of your hands. Solomon concludes that many dreams or concerns and many words, what is that, nothing, vanity, emptiness. What is something? Fearing God.

In conclusion, by application. First, be careful with your tongue. Be thoughtful before you speak. Don't use many words. There's no need to multiply words. Second, if you promise to give something to God, you better do it. To not do it is sin and it will be asking for divine discipline. Third, Fear God. Just live as if you are in His presence all the time and you will be alright. If we could just do that one thing everything else would fall into place, wouldn't it? Fourth, realize that we are seated positionally in the heavenly places, and that we actually enter the real temple in spiritual worship in heaven, and so what we do there and how we conduct ourselves is serious business.

¹ Donald R. Glenn, "Ecclesiastes," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 987.