

# Reverent Worship

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Well, good morning, everyone. It's good to see you this morning. As James mentioned, we're going to be continuing our walk through Ecclesiastes, coming to Ecclesiastes chapter five this morning. And as we begin, some of you may know that I enjoy running. And though I haven't done a whole lot of races in the past, a few years ago when I was living in South Carolina, some friends and I who ran together, we decided that we were going to sign up for a 50K race in the mountains of North Carolina. And so we planned that out months in advance, spent many months training and doing some hill exercises, increasing our mileage on a weekly basis until it was the weekend of the race. And so we drove up to North Carolina, a couple hour drive away. And as you do with ultra marathons, you actually check in the day before the race. So we arrived on a Friday evening. The race was the next morning. And as typical of these races, there's a social event the evening before the race. People hang out, get to talk with one another, have dinner together before your preparation for the race the next day. And it's really interesting, in these settings, you see two very different groups of people. You see those who are there simply for the experience. They want to have fun. They want to get the race t-shirt. They want to meet other people. And so that's very evident that night. There's not a whole lot of preparation that goes on for them. They hang out and they have a few beers and they eat a burger and not really concerned about what time they go to bed. And then there's those who are in the other camp, those who really care about the race they're going to run. And I fell into that camp. And not because I was in any illusion, under any illusion, I thought I had any chance of winning the race, but I had put in the time and the effort. I wanted to take this race seriously. And so that night it wasn't about drinking and eating. It was about getting rest and concentrating, eating a healthy meal and going to bed early. And so when we see in our passage today, we're going to be looking at two very similar groups of people that we can come across in the church. We have those that are really good at showing up. They are faithful at following ritual and tradition, but their heart is far from God.

And then we have those who do more than just show up for worship, but they actually participate and are sincere in their worship. They demonstrate their sincerity through how they act in worship. And so we see these people that come before God in awe and reverence. Their worship is authentic and real. And so that's what I want us to consider today is why we're here. Why do we do all this stuff on Sunday that we willingly come and sit in a pew and we sing songs and we listen to scripture and a sermon being preached to us? What is the purpose of that and how ought we to do it in a way that is truly honoring to God? And so let's look at our passage, Ecclesiastes chapter five, verses one through seven. 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 what they do, do not know that they do wrong. 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. A dream comes when there are many cares and many words make the speech of a fool. When you make a vow to God, do not delay to fulfill it. He has no pleasure in fools.

Fulfill your vow. It is better not to make a vow than to make one and not fulfill it. Do not let your mouth lead you into sin. And do not protest to the temple messenger. My vow was a mistake. Why should God be angry at what you say and destroy the work of your hands? Much dreaming and many words are meaningless. Therefore, fear God. This is the word of God. Will you pray with me?

[ 4 : 1 2 ] God, we recognize that our hearts can be so easily captivated by the things of this world. And even now there are distractions that can be around us that can keep us from knowing you and desiring to be in your presence. And so, God, we ask simply that you shed light on your word and you shed light on ourselves, that you shed light on our hearts. Show us ourselves and show us your

glory, we pray. In Jesus' name, amen. Well, as has been mentioned, we've been walking through the book of Ecclesiastes. And it's been interesting to see the author of this book give his reflections as to the purpose of life. Over and over again, we see him repeat that life is meaningless. Vanity, vanity, all is vanity. We see him expressing his frustration or even his confusion when he tries to determine what the purpose of life truly is. And so now as we turn to chapter five, we start to see this transition. Because the first few chapters, it was all about observation and reflection. And so for the first time in this passage, in chapter five, we see him speaking directly to his audience and giving instruction. Ultimately, his instruction ends with what we see in verse seven, to fear God.

And so before we actually look at these commands and look at a few of them specifically, I want us to think first about who is the audience that the author of Ecclesiastes is speaking to. Because he's been talking these past few chapters about the wicked, the self-indulgent, the workers. And we may think, well, now he's going to address these people that don't know God, that are far from God. But that's not what he does here. He actually addresses the religious. He's addressing those who actually have some sort of relationship with God, who are following God, supposedly. It's people that come to the temple, that offer sacrifices, that follow the law. So he's really addressing the church here and calling out the casual relationship that they have in worship. And so if you're new to work, if you're new to church, or maybe you're from another religious background, maybe you think that church, religion is just all about following rules. It's about jumping through hoops in order to earn

God's pleasure. So when we come on Sunday, it's just going through the motions, sing the songs, listen to the sermon, pay attention when the scripture's reading. If we do those things, we will please God. And that's certainly not what the Bible says over and over again. We see just the opposite. In fact, if we look in the Old Testament, through the prophets, especially the prophet Isaiah, that God spoke through the prophet Isaiah, and he was very clear on his rebuke to his people in regards to their worship. If we look in Isaiah 1, starting verse 11, a few verses I'm going to read here. The multitude of your sacrifices, what are they to me, says the Lord? I have more than enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat, of fattened animals. I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my court?

Stop bringing meaningless offerings. Your incense is detestable to me. New moons, Sabbaths, and convocations. I cannot bear your worthless assemblies. Your new moon feasts and your appointed festivals I hate with all my being. They have become a burden to me. I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands in prayer, I hide my eyes from you. Even when you offer many prayers, I am not listening. Those are pretty harsh words. And we think about it, if we were to put that in common language in our current context, it's basically God saying to us, I hate the way that some of you do church. If we move to the New Testament, we see the same message from the lips of Jesus. You would think that his harshest critique may be of the sinners and the prostitutes and the tax collectors. No, he reserves his hardest critiques for the religious leaders of the day.

[ 8 : 32 ] In Matthew 23, 27, it says this, Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside, but on the inside are full of bones of the dead and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside, you appear to people as righteous, but on the inside, you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness. And so over and over again, we see in the Bible what true worship is. It's not about our actions. It's not about our rituals or traditions. It's about our hearts. And so that's what I want us to focus on today. What is the heart?

What should our heart be in offering true worship to God? And so if we follow along with what the writer of Ecclesiastes talks about, the three points that are easily laid out for us when we think about the heart are actually three other body parts. He refers to our feet and our ears and our mouth. And so those are going to be our three points today. As we consider true, authentic worship, we're going to look first at our feet. If we look in verse one, it says, guard your steps when you go to the house of the Lord. A little translation would be to walk prudently. And so the author is not only referring how we worship when we actually enter a church in the presence of other saints, he's concerned also with how we prepare ourselves for worship.

And so this may remind us, we think back in the book of Exodus, when Moses comes to God for the first time, God presents himself in a burning bush in Exodus three, you may remember what God says to Moses. He says, do not come near, take off the sandals from your feet for the place on

which you are standing is holy. Moses hid in his face in fear and God is communicating his holiness to his people.

And so we must be careful in how we approach God in his presence. And so this raises questions for us now today. How do we approach worship? What does it mean when we need to come into the house of the Lord cautiously? Do we prepare ourselves on a Sunday morning with awe and reverence? If your house is anything like mine on a Sunday morning or really any day of the week, probably the answer is a resounding no. There is lots of instructions being offered that is maybe followed by fighting or arguing.

[10:58] There can be complaining or bickering in your last minute. You're rushing out the door to get the church. And even if you get here on time, there may be some frowning faces that you say, please smile and be happy. You sit in the pew, but really your heart is far from God. And so how do we guard our steps when we go to the house of the Lord? It's important to consider not only for ourselves, but for our families. How do we set that tone that we are prepared to come into the house of God and worship with sincerity? But the thing is, it's not just about the Sunday morning. It's not just about putting on the right attitude before we enter into the house of God. It's much more farther reaching here. It's this overall spiritual behavior that we need to exhibit. If you think back to what I talked about, the race that I did, if I had just shown up on a Friday before the race and decided that I was going to take this race seriously, it really wouldn't have made much of an effect, right? It was the months ahead of time where

I planned and I prepared and I logged the miles and I ran the hills that made the difference in that race that proved that I was sincere and serious about wanting to do well. And so we can't just flip a switch on a Sunday morning and think that we can be genuine and sincere in our worship when the whole week through we've been far from God. Our worship doesn't begin and end on a Sunday morning. That's what God calls out his people for as hypocrites. We need to recognize that we are always in the presence of God. And so worship is not reserved only for this building. We need to guard our steps. As it says in Ephesians 5:15, be careful how you walk, not as unwise, but as wise, making the best use of your time because the days are evil. So we see that true worship is much more than sitting here in a pew on Sunday morning. It is about how we walk daily with the Lord. And so that turns to our second point then. Not only do we worship with our feet, we worship with our ears. Second part of verse one, go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools who do not know that they do wrong. Now, if you're not familiar with the Bible, it's important to recognize that worship in Old Testament times was much different from how we worship today. And one of those main differences was the sacrifices that were offered by God's people. There's whole lists of rules as far as what sacrifices are to be offered, why you offer sacrifices, how it's supposed to be done. And so while there's great meaning and great significance and symbolism in these sacrifices, oftentimes the people of God came to the Lord and really just a mindless following of these rituals. And so this is what God was so angry about, what we read in Isaiah one, that people are coming to offer these sacrifices without any heart behind it. And he says, I hate this, stop it. This is not what I'm requesting from you. And so as I mentioned there, I think a lot of people, outsiders, when they think of Christianity, they think it's just about following these rules, right?

You come to church, you do good things in order that God will be pleased with you. We need to make God happy with our actions as if God is some egomaniac that demands our obedience. Unfortunately, I think a lot of people think the message of Christianity is that if you follow the rules, then God will be happy with you. But we need to be clear here that God does not need us. God doesn't need you and he doesn't need me. And it may sound a little awkward. I mean, from our humanly perspective, if you were to offer someone help and they say, no, I don't need you, we can be offended by that, right? But this news of the gospel shouldn't be offensive to us. This should be encouraging to us because when we think about it, how powerful could our God truly be if he requires help from the likes of you and me? Paul says this in Acts 17, 24 and 25.

[15:13] The Lord who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. And he is not served by human hands as if he needed anything.

Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. And so if we go back to our passage in Ecclesiastes and the author is calling out these religious people for this mindless ritual that they've been involved in. And he says they're doing it so casually at the end of verse one, it says this, they don't even know what they are doing is wrong.

They're so used to performing this mindless ritual that sinning has just become second nature to them and they're confusing it with worship. And so rather than continue to do this, author offers instructions. He says to draw near and listen. And so when we come to God, God isn't asking us to act or to speak. He calls us first to listen. And it's interesting, this, this verb in the Hebrew, it says to listen. It doesn't just mean to hear what someone is saying. It's actually to hear and to respond. So when it says, listen in this passage, it's saying to listen and to obey.

For those of us who have children, I'm sure there's been occasion where you've given instruction and you've had to give that instruction more than once, maybe more than twice. If you think about just school routine, right, there's lots of things that need to be done in order to get out the door in the morning, brush your teeth, pack your bag, get your shoes on, make your bed. In our household, these things have to be reminded on a daily basis. And oftentimes when they're said, you go away for five minutes, come back and it's still not done. And so if you're like me, Lord willing, in done with all calmness, you come to your child and you get their attention and you say, stop doing what you're doing. Listen to my instruction and do it. It's easy to pick on kids because we see this so often displayed, but this is something that's truly displayed in our lives as well. This is an attitude that we often exhibit. When we go to church, we sing songs, we sit in the pew, we listen to the sermon, but that's not what God is telling us to do. He tells us to stop, stop it with the mindless ritual.

That's not what I want you to do. I want you to truly listen. I want you to obey me out of authentic reverence and worship. And so I think we need to ask ourselves, how are we failing to listen to God?

[ 17 : 52 ] What distractions surround us even here right now? Not externally necessarily, but even within our own minds, in our own hearts. Do we get caught up thinking about what we're going to have for lunch or what's on my calendar this week or this work that I still have to complete?

See, having a posture for worship is having a proper posture is something that we're going to truly crave relationship with God. And it's really going to affect how we view church.

Because there's certainly those who think, oh, church is boring. I don't really get anything out of it. We need to have to recognize, well, where is that person's heart? When we recognize the opportunity to be in authentic relationship with God, church will not be boring.

It will be a blessing. Church, we're not going to view as an obligation. We're going to see as an invitation. From God to enter into his presence with his people in order to praise our God.

And so the author, he's discussed our feet and our ears, and then he moves on to our mouths. This is where he spends most of his time, the main emphasis of this passage.

[ 19 : 06 ] We look at verse two. 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.

I don't know if many of you are into politics. I've always enjoyed politics ever since I was a child, really. I studied politics at university. I still love reading the news and books and podcasts that have to do with politics.

And especially when politics and law intersect with my background in law in the United States, I've always been interested when there is a new nominee to the Supreme Court of the United States.

So if you don't know U.S. politics, there's nine justices that sit on the Supreme Court.

They're nominated by the president. They have to be confirmed by the Senate. And so it's interesting, after they're nominated by the president, there's a lot of preparation that these nominees go through because they have to sit in front of the Senate in these Senate hearings.

And there's always one important point of advice that's always given to these nominees. It says, over and over again, I've heard this said, they say, And so I wonder how often that's our approach to prayer.

[ 20 : 34 ] That we speak, but we say very little. Oftentimes we use this very formal and flowery language when we pray, especially in the presence of others. And our focus can turn more to impressing God or impressing those who are listening than really caring about the substance of what we're saying.

And so as a guard against this, the author says, To remember that God is in heaven and that we are on earth. And you may think, well, is that supposed to emphasize the distance between us and God?

So don't really worry about your words because God's too far off that he can't hear us? No, not at all. But he's giving us this information to say, God is in heaven.

We are on earth making this point so that rather than we can be aware of who we are approaching in prayer. That we're talking to the sovereign, holy God of the universe.

And so the point is to not be flippant in our prayers, not to be motivated merely by ritual or tradition, recognize the honor and the privilege we have when we come before God.

[ 21 : 38 ] Jesus actually talked about this tendency himself. In Matthew 6, he's talking to his disciples. Chapter 6, verse 7, he says this, When you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think that they will be heard because of their many words.

Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask. It's interesting here that Jesus calls his Father, our Father.

He says, your Father knows what you need before you ask. I think we can often overlook the significance of that. We fail to recognize that those who've received God's gift of grace through faith in Jesus, we have become children of God.

And that should truly transform the way that we pray. I mean, thinking of children again, how often if you have children do they come to you with requests, asking you to do something for them or with them, countless times in the day.

And how do they do it? There's no formality or pretense in the way that they speak to us. They don't care what we're doing. They don't care if they interrupt us. They're not concerned with how they ask their question. And so it should be with our Heavenly Father.

[ 22 : 55 ] When he says, let our words be few, he's not saying, limit what you say to God because we don't want to annoy him. He's saying this, when we pray, meet it.

And so let's not fool ourselves into thinking that our sincerity of our prayers or the quality of our prayers is dictated by the words that we use or the length of the prayers that we pray.

And I think this is a good reminder for all of us as we approach prayer. Those who have been Christians a long time who are very comfortable praying, those who may not be of the faith or very new to Christianity and are not comfortable in prayer.

For those who are very confident in their prayers, we need to ask what kind of formality has crept into our prayer life that we need to eliminate.

When we think about praying in public with other people, how can we pray in such a way that doesn't necessarily intimidate people but can encourage others?

[ 24 : 01 ] For those of us who may not be comfortable with praying or haven't had much experience praying, how can we train ourselves to be more concerned with what God thinks of our prayers than those around us?

How can we grow in an eagerness and a willingness to speak to our Heavenly Father? When we pray, we need to remember that we come before our Father who loves us, who listens to us, who is ready to receive us, and knows our requests before we even ask them.

Not only does the author of Ecclesiastes talk about our words in regards to prayer, but he also mentions them in regards to vows. We look at verse 4 and 5.

When you make a vow to God, do not delay to fulfill it. He has no pleasure in fools. Fulfill your vow. It is better not to make a vow than to make one and not fulfill it. Now, in the Old Testament, we talked about sacrifices being normal.

Now, vows would have been much more of commonplace in the Old Testament. They served as a promise of someone to worship God through offering if God would answer their prayers.

[ 25 : 15 ] Maybe the most familiar or potentially famous vow that we know in the Old Testament is that of a woman named Hannah, a woman who is barren, who couldn't have children, who pled to the Lord that God may gift her a son.

We know that she made a vow to God, that if God would bless her with a child, she would commit that child to the service of the Lord for the entirety of that child's life. We know that God answered Hannah's prayer, and she gave Hannah a son, Samuel.

We know that Hannah took her son, Samuel, to the temple and dedicated him there to the Lord. And so we see that vows are very important. They're not, it's a costly matter that are not to be broken.

And so the author here says, fulfill your vow quickly or don't make one at all, because he recognizes the human tendency for us to cool in our enthusiasm after we've made a promise like this.

So often when time passes, we may get the tendency to break that vow or kind of change the conditions of it that may be more suitable to our current situation. We may not be in the habit of

making vows like they did in the Old Testament.

[ 26 : 26 ] We still have vows within the church today. If you want to be a member of this church or any other church, there's membership vows that you have to take. In this church, if you are becoming a member, you need to vow.

You vow to submit yourself to the government and discipline of the church and promise to seek its purity and peace. You vow to support the church in its worship and work by your prayers and presence and gifts and service.

And so vows are still important in the life of the church today. They shouldn't be entered into lightly. And the problem is we see so often what happens after these vows are made.

Again, that tendency creeps in where that enthusiasm of our commitment can wane. Maybe there's busyness in your life.

What's the first thing to go? Probably your commitment to the church. Maybe there's disagreement within the church. Decisions are made that you don't like. So you stop showing up. Even thinking of our current situation, two years on in a pandemic, when it's so easy to be focused solely on our personal health to the exclusion of the health of the church.

[ 27 : 40 ] It's something we need to consider. That vows are meaningful. And Jesus really simplifies it for us in Matthew 5.

He says simply this, Let your yes be yes and your no be no. Every commitment we make, every promise we make, is just as though we make a vow and should be kept in the same way.

And so we need to ask ourselves, are we keeping our vows to the church? If you're a member of this church, have you kept your vows to God and to one another? Are we committed to authentic worship even when it may not be convenient?

Are we committed to the service of the church, to the mission of the church, even when it's difficult? If you're not in church, maybe you think of church membership.

You think, This doesn't really sound like something I'd ever want to commit to. Look around at the people here. This is not the bunch of people I want to be committed to. And the truth is, yeah, we're surrounded by a group of sinners here.

[ 28 : 41 ] But we need to recognize that when we make a commitment to one another, it's not because we think that one another are worthy of this commitment. We commit to one another because God is worthy of our commitment.

We don't commit to God in an effort to earn favor with God or think He's going to be pleased with us. We commit to God out of gratitude for His commitment to us. See, at the very beginning of the Bible, God comes to a man named Abraham and He commits to be His God and promises Him that all nations would be blessed through Him.

And He promises to send a Messiah to save His people from their sins. And He fulfills that promise by the sending of His Son, Jesus, through His life and death and resurrection. We are brought into relationship with the Father.

And so those who believe our sins are forgiven and God remembers them no more. And so that is the reality with which we need to remember that should affect every aspect of our worship because it's ultimately going to lead where the author here concludes in this passage that we must fear God. That is our ultimate goal. It doesn't mean to just be scared of God, but it means to come with Him in awe and reverence, to worship Him in sincerity for what He has done to us.

[ 30 : 08 ] And so if we fear God, that's going to affect the way that we walk. If we fear God, that's going to affect the way that we listen and obey. If we fear God, that's going to affect the way that we speak.

And so the question again, why are we here today? Are you here simply because you have friends here and you're looking for community? Are you here out of obligation or duty to think that this is what God expects of you?

Are we here just simply out of tradition and ritual because this is something you've done your whole life and you're going to continue doing it? Or are you here out of a heart of genuine worship?

James read for us from Hebrews 10 earlier in the service. To paraphrase what it says there, it says that we enter the most holy place with confidence in the blood of Jesus.

We are invited to draw near to God with sincere hearts, with a full assurance of faith, having our hearts cleansed and our bodies washed with pure water.

[ 31 : 16 ] And so God extends that invitation to each one of us to come in worship. Not to come in worship because you think you owe something to God, but to come in worship because of what he has done for us.

Come. Let's pray.