

Ecclesiastes 5:1–7

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[0 : 00] Join me for the reading of God's word. Therefore, let your words be few, for a dream comes with much business, and a fool's voice with many words.

When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for He has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow. It is better that you should not vow, than that you should vow and not pay.

Let not your mouth lead you into sin, and do not say before the messenger that it was a mistake.

Why should God be angry at your voice and destroy the works of your hands?

For when dreams increase and words grow many, there is vanity, but God is the one you must fear.

This is the word of the Lord. You may be seated. Well, warmest of welcomes, Christ Church of Chicago.

[1 : 35] Thank you for being with us this morning. Father, we now come to you with in contrition, expectant, awaiting, eager to hear your word.

You believe that you are a God who speaks, unlike any other God in all the world. That you speak to your people, and so here we are.

Help us to listen well. We ask these things for Jesus' sake. Amen. Thank you. Here is 1961.

Though most of us were not around, some things from 1961 have found their way to 2026.

Particularly song lyrics from Elvis Presley's acclaimed, I can't help falling in love with you.

[2 : 42] If you're unfamiliar with the song, it's hard to read the opening lines without singing. Wise men say, only fools rush in, but I can't help falling in love with you.

Elvis made the line famous, but it was penned originally by a British poet, Alexander Pope in 1711, for fools rush in where angels fear to tread.

The phrase, fools rush in, has become an expression describing people who recklessly enter a situation where they fail to exercise caution.

It has found our way into, it's found its way into song lyrics, movie titles, and certainly our common speech to describe someone who's naive, unwise, and rushes into something that they have not measured or thought out well.

I've tagged our time together. Only fools rush in. Only fools rush in. For the first time in the book of Ecclesiastes, the writer moves from this self-reflective philosophical posture to declarative and instructive statements.

[4 : 11] He has provided his thoughts up to this time, his reflections. Let me tell you about time. Let me tell you about wealth. Let me tell you about work and wisdom and death.

And these are largely experiential musings and lessons learned from a life filled with observation.

You could see in previous chapters, you would say, I saw, and I saw, and I saw, and I saw.

However, when we come to chapter 5, instead of saying what he saw, he's going to prescribe advice or directives, even imperatives.

This is what makes chapter 5, verses 1 to 7, noteworthy. There is a literary change. It changes stylistically. The writer will now move for the first time to a series of exhortations and directives.

He moves from, I've shared many of the things that I've seen, and now considering what I've seen, this is what you must do. Incidentally, the directives are all associated with worship.

[5 : 33] In a sense, he's adding to what he's observed. I've seen what he's saying. People approach God as fools.

Three times. You've heard it read by Guyton in verse 1, verse 3, and verse 4. There is a way to come to God and be dismissed as a fool.

These individuals will find, come to worship, and they commit evil, according to chapter 5, verse 1.

These individuals come to a worship gathering and fall into sin, chapter 5, verse 6.

And this is the grave warning of the passage. There is a worship that is wayward. There is a worship that you and I can engage in that leaves us actually in a worse condition than when we first entered.

Beware. Only fools rush in. Our worship, and this is my argument, our worship of God is a serious matter that requires reverence and awe.

[6 : 53] From his vantage point, the writer or the teacher has watched thousands enter at what would have been at the time the temple.

It would have glistened with all its gold under the Middle Eastern sun. It would have been a stunning sight to behold, given its foundation. Modern archaeologists have revealed that some of the single stones, 12 feet by 15 feet, weighing 80 tons, equivalent to 20 elephants, if that's what you count, weight with.

Single stones. And many came to the temple for worship. But what intrigues the preacher or the teacher is not merely the procession or the throng that's coming into the temple grounds.

No, what's intriguing the teacher or the preacher in the text is how they approach the temple.

Some, according to the text, are offering a sacrifice of fools. Some careless observance, flippant, absent of any engagement of the soul.

[8 : 18] Probably, they do it out of custom or habit, thoughtless. Maybe succumbing to social pressure.

And as they approach, verse 1, now the writer says, As you approach this temple, do this. Guard your steps.

Other translations read, watch your feet. It conveys not a literal watching of the feet, but it's about the way in which you come. When one encounters God, there is a posture.

There is an attitude. There is a demeanor that one must have before the Lord. Another way of thinking about it is it's a type of preparedness. Preparedness when we approach the Lord.

We do it in all areas of life. Just talking to a graduate student this past week. When they're about to meet with their advisor for an important meeting or discussion about their research, preparedness is required.

[9 : 19] When an employee is going into an important meeting with their boss or superior, preparedness is necessary. When an interviewee walks into an interview, preparedness is necessary.

Perhaps it's a mental preparedness. Getting in the right mind. Perhaps it's a physical preparedness. Becoming your hair. Dressing well.

Iron in a shirt. Regardless, we would be foolish to walk into any of these areas of life unprepared.

And if we were to walk in any of those circumstances flippantly, casually, or dismissively, we would be shown to be fools.

And so it is with God. If we approach human authorities in this way, then there's certainly an appropriate posture, attitude, and demeanor, and preparedness when we come to worship God.

How do you prepare for it? How do you walk in these days? What is on your mind? What is in your heart?

[10 : 41] I had a mentor six days out of the week. Would read the New York Times religiously. But for some reason on the Lord's Day. Would say, not this.

I remember. I've told this to you. Growing up, I didn't have a curfew. Which is. Which is all sorts of things.

But I would stay out as late as I could Saturday night. And I would walk in. I sleepwalk in. A Sunday morning. Barely ambulatory.

That's how I prepared for worship. Until my dad confronted me. He said, you know, your preparations for Sunday morning actually start Saturday night.

And they got me. Guard your steps. We don't come to God trivially, flippantly, or casually. More care is required.

[11 : 48] Heightened cautions must be taken. And the teacher wants to say, there is more that needs to be done than merely walking into the temple with your sacrifice in hand.

It goes beyond any external duty. It's a posture that comes to the heart. There is a preparation that must occur as you walk up these steps.

The being present, which I thought was all that was necessary, is great. It's commendable. You're here. But we're not here just to receive a perfect attendance record.

We're here to worship God well. Not as fools. And so the text will provide now a three-fold safeguard for our worship.

What does this look like? What is preparation? How do I enter? What must I give my thoughts to? Where is my heart supposed to be placed? There's three. First, let your words be few.

[12:51] Secondly, let your vows be fulfilled. And finally, let your worship be filled with fear. Let your words be few, verses 1 to 3.

The teacher has observed this phenomena. Namely, there are those who stand before God with much to say. With full mouths. With an abundance of words.

As God's people historically would gather in these times, God's words would be read and they would be explained. But the fool is full of words. It's conceivable that they are talking while the Torah is being read.

It's conceivable that they're talking when it's being expounded and taught. They draw near, but they're unable to listen. Why? Because they're full of words.

And maybe it's not verbal or audible words. But they're endlessly running their mental mouths. I've come to church, God, and I have something to say to you.

[13:57] This last week was terrible. And if I had it my way, this is how I would do it. God, listen up. I have other things to say.

I don't like how you're governing my life. I disapprove how things are unfolding. I disagree with how this universe is being managed. Have you read the news, God? Are you aware of this, God?

And our thoughts, my thoughts, are running this on glowing, reckless, and noisy speech. We are easily distracted as we sit under the instruction of the word, aren't we?

God, do you know what's coming up this week? That Friday interview is very important. God, do you know what's coming up this week? This exam or this test, this paper is very important.

Yes, they're very important. We don't come in here to run our mouth. We come here, according to verse 1, to draw near and to listen.

[15:05] It is therefore that we, it is necessary to ask the Lord to help us here. You see, this is the posture of the fool speaking to God as if he's somehow accountable to us.

The fool does not regard that he stands here on earth and God is enthroned in heaven. The fool is, has entirely forgotten that he has gathered to worship God.

God is the focal point of this. Not me. Not you. We gather to hear God's words, not our own.

The fool fills the space with many words as a big daydreamer fills his thoughts with business, his activity with business or toil.

For this attitude, the worshiper must watch their mouth and consider the chasm between God and man. He's transcendent in all his ways. He is unapproachable light.

[16:08] He makes the sun appear like a waning ember. He's eternal. We are finite. He has no beginning or end. We are destined to die. He is almighty.

We are weak at our best. He is the creator of all things. We are but dust. He is holy. We are sin laden. He is pure. We are impure.

He's omniscient. We are ignorant. And the list goes on. He's unchanging. But we're fickle. He's faithful. And we're faithless. He is love in its fullness. And we are mere derivatives of that love.

Do you know who you are worshiping this morning? We are the hose when confronted with the sheer grandeur of God above. Like Job.

Oh, I spoke up and I said what I didn't understand. These are things too wonderful for me, God. I therefore despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.

[17:11] Fools come to God with many words. Therefore, we must be slow to speak, quick to listen. Many words don't merit God's favor towards us.

Many words don't incline God's ear. When Jesus instructs his disciples to pray, you remember what he said? Hey, when you pray, don't heap up or pile up empty phrases like the Gentiles do.

They think they'll be heard because of their many words. Don't be like them, Jesus said. There is this attitude that we can have.

And maybe some of us might talk our way into heaven. Immediately, you're probably thinking of a friend. I immediately thought of a few friends.

They think that they'll talk to God or out-talk or talk down to God. Ultimately, when it's all said and done, our words are few.

[18 : 22] Because our words are inadequate, really. They're insufficient. Incapable of describing, capturing the God of the Bible.

Just like when you stand at the foothills of the Rockies, if you ever visit. Or the Alps. Or the Himalayas. And you're caught speechless.

Or you're overlooking the grandest of canyons. In silence. Or you're gazing up at the stars in the middle of the night. In quiet. You have few words because you are awestruck.

There are no words to say what I see. And let it be so with God. Let your words be few.

Secondly, let your vows be fulfilled. Let your vows be fulfilled. Verses 4 to 7. The teacher provides us with one clear example of how many words demonstrate foolishness.

[19 : 28] It relates to the making of vows. Temple vows were a form of speech. And a common feature in Old Testament worship. It usually involved something like, God, I'm going to set aside these goods, these resources, these children even.

If you come through. Something like that. It came on the heels often of answered prayer. God, if you grant me this, then I will vow this.

And you may be familiar with the story of Hannah. There's many examples we could turn to. She was barren. The Lord had closed her womb, according to 1 Samuel chapter 1.

And she was being shamed by others. And then she vowed, Lord, if you look upon my affliction, and you remember me, and don't forget me, and you give me a son, then I will give him to you all the days of his life.

1 Samuel 1.11. Lord, if you give me a son, I'll give him to you forever. That's my vow.

[20 : 50] And if you're a student of the Bible, you know the Lord gave a son named Samuel. And you know Hannah kept her end of the vow.

And you know God accomplished his good purposes with Samuel. But you see, the temptation is made known in this text. There's a temptation when God answers a prayer that vows would go unfulfilled.

You can imagine. Oh, I didn't mean it that way, God. The promise or vow made to God would altogether be forgotten or even delayed or prolonged.

And it invites the displeasure of God. You see it there. It leads you to sin. It actually makes God angry in verse 6.

And you might be asking, well, why? God didn't need Samuel. He could have figured it out a different way. God doesn't need my resources or what I set aside or my allotment.

[21 : 56] Why? Well, it's because the verbal commitment that worshipers make and their failure to uphold the vow, it sins and angers God because it's an antithesis of who God is.

Now, let me explain this a little bit. God is truth. And so, his people are to be truth tellers and truth speakers and truth demonstrators.

The people of God were not permitted to bear false witness or lie because God himself cannot lie. We reflect him. Moreover, God's words are always true.

And his people's words must, his people must also have true words. We are a people whose yes is to be yes and whose no is to be no.

We are those bound by our words because God is faithful to his own word. Lord, I remember on more than one occasion, I have failed to keep a promise to my children.

[23 : 19] Pastors do that too? Yes. Pastors as well as all people fail at keeping their promises. And to be honest, I cannot even remember the content of the promise, but I certainly do remember the consequences of the failed promise.

Fear-filled eyes. The utter horror of a child discovering that their father or mother could not uphold their word. What we call that is a lack of integrity.

And God is saying, you are not that. You cannot be that. I am not that. Don't you dare be that. And when you come in worship. And when you lift your hands.

And when you bow your knee. Or when you prostrate yourself. And you declare your allegiance. Lord, all I have is yours. All is yours. My life is yours.

Don't go out a hypocrite. Duplicist saying, I only meant that from that 10.30 hour to that 12 p.m. hour. No. What you vow, you keep.

[24 : 31] What you vow, you keep. We are not those who dribble out meaningless words. Certainly not to one another and not to God.

Our lip service doesn't interest him. It actually infuriates him. He is not keen on those who merely talk spiritual things, but fail to walk out of spiritual life.

One commentator equates unfulfilled vows to this is like playing a game with God. Well, God, let's do this.

And let's do this. Let's. No. We don't treat religious devotion and commitment like a game. This isn't some faith you barter. You do this for me and then I'll do this for you, God.

No, no, no. That's not the Christian faith. We respond to what the infinite God has done for us. And some of us have made vows.

[25 : 31] And I'm calling them into your recollection now because you said to God sometime, God, if you get me out of this, I'll follow you.

I promise. God, if you deliver me from these circumstances, I'll follow you. I promise. And he's done that multiple times.

And yet you failed to follow. I made a vow to God in a dorm room in Germany as I weighed the call to pastoral ministry.

I remember it vividly. It went like this. God, if you do this, then I will pledge my life to you in pastoral ministry.

And lo and behold, God did this. And I said, eh, I need a little bit more. Let's try this one, God.

[26 : 28] Try this fleece. Can you make this one wet? And I remember the day I was in my bedroom, promised land of California.

And the voice of God, as audible as audible could be, said, Bing, you remember that deal you made to me? I said, no, yeah, of course.

And there I was, sobbing, kind of infuriated because it was a bad, seemed like a bad deal on my part. Tears running down my face.

Screaming internally. Rebellion in my heart. But those were the vows that I made. And I made vows on February 7, 2009 to my wife.

I made vows to you as a congregation, as a member, and as an elder. And they were all done. In sincerity. In solemnity.

[27 : 28] With great gravity. And I want, and to be honest, those three vows that I have taken, God has used to be the most influential, transformative, and beneficial decisions of my life.

And I say that because some of you need to make that vow to the Lord. I give you my life. And I promise. I can't promise.

I'll say, God will make that the most valuable decision of all your life. The worship of God is a serious matter.

We do it with reverence and awe. Let our words be few. Let our vows be fulfilled. And lastly, very quickly, let our worship be fear-filled.

Fear God. That's the end of verse 7. And in spoiler alert, this is the concluding matter of the whole book. Fear of God must govern all of life.

[28 : 41] But here in our text, it must govern our worship of God. And we may associate the term fear with being scared. Is that what it means? I want to say a little bit.

It connotes a response of trembling. Because of fright or terror. It is that which we should feel on occasion when we worship.

Holy, holy, holy. It's the transcendence of God cast over the worshiper.

We come to God in fear-filled reverence. This is an awe-filled veneration. Another translation reads, therefore, stand in awe of God.

It is approaching the king and bowing in silence. It is the people of God. You might remember this episode. Crying out for the very preservation of their lives.

[29 : 45] As God spoke from Mount Sinai through Moses, delivering the Ten Commandments. There's thunder, there's lightning, there's smoke. And the people were afraid.

They trembled and stood far off. And then they said to Moses, hey, Moses, you talk to us. But don't let him talk to us. Lest we die.

The writer of the Hebrews will build off of that episode. And he summons us, you and I, to offer God acceptable worship.

With reverence and awe. Why? For God is a consuming fire. We worship a God who is a consuming fire.

And here we come to, and we will find one of the great paradoxes of our faith. We find one who is terrifying and awesome in splendor. And in the same God, we find one who is tender and full of gracious compassion.

[30 : 49] See, the passage invites us, as I wind up, to do something very terrifying. In fear and in reverence and in awe, we are summoned.

Verse 1. Draw near. Walk towards that. I'm not going to that. That's a consuming fire. But the Bible says your God who's a consuming fire is asking you to draw near.

To come close. The most holy one, ironically, is the one we are to run towards, not away from.

One who is well aware of the excessive words that come out of your heart. The evil in your heart.

The one who is well aware of your and my lack of integrity and my failure at word keeping.

The one who is rightfully angered at my failing to live in ways that please him. He is the one who says, you come. Come here.

[31 : 53] Come near. Come near. And you would do well if you stood far off in terrifying fear, knowing what it would be like to walk near his holiness.

It would be like walking towards the sun. You would certainly be consumed. But the text holds out. You're able to draw near.

How? How? Well, it's in the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. All of God's justice is brought to bear.

And all of God's love is made manifest.

We draw near with appropriate fear. We draw near with appropriate faith. We can even enter, as the writer to the Hebrews would say, we can enter into the most holy of places.

By the blood of Jesus, we come with a true heart. A sincere heart. Not a duplicitous heart. Assured that Jesus' death cleanses us and enables us to approach this God rightly in a way that pleases him.

[33 : 00] And this morning, here before us is a table. A table we'll partake in. It's emblematic of this reality. Christ's body and his blood given for you.

And heed Paul's words. Don't come to the table flippantly or in pretense as fools.

But come. Guarded steps. Examining ourselves with discernment and preparedness. Offering worship to God.

Who's a consuming fire. And a compassionate friend. Father, we thank you for your word.

And it's warning. That there are perils, great dangers for those who come to you as fools. And let us not be foolish in our worship.

[34 : 03] But may we be those who worship God seriously. In awe and reverence.

Father, show yourself to be in heaven. Remind us that we are here on earth. May our words be few. Amen. We ask these things. For Jesus' sake. Amen.