

Fearing God

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 24 July 2016

Preacher: Cedric Moss

[0 : 00] This morning we are continuing our series in Ecclesiastes and our attention will be confined to verses 1 through 7.

! I'm pretty sure most of us, if not all of us, have answered in our hearts yes. But I'm also pretty sure that not only have we answered yes, I would say that most of us have probably also answered quickly. Not only answered yes, but we have answered quickly. And so, I want to ask the question slightly differently. And it is, do you really fear God? Do you really fear God? I think this is a very important question for us to consider because there are many people who think they fear God who do not fear God.

[1 : 23] And yet, Scripture in many places teaches us different ways by which we can test and measure our fear of God or whether we fear God at all.

And one of those places is the passage that we have come to this morning in our week-by-week study in Ecclesiastes. It's this passage in Ecclesiastes 5, the first seven verses.

And I want us to consider it together. I want us to consider it individually and really consider, do I fear God? So, please follow along as I read Ecclesiastes 5, starting in verse 1 and concluding in verse 7.

And I'm reading from the English Standard Version. And I'm reading from the English Standard Version.

And I'm reading from the English Standard Version.

[3 : 17] It's reading from the English Standard Version.

And words grow many. And words grow many. There is vanity. But God is the one you must fear. Let's pray. Father, we thank you this morning for the privilege of being able to sit under the instruction of your word to hear it read and then to hear it expounded.

And Lord, we ask for your grace. And Lord, we ask for your grace. We ask for your help to enable us to be humble hearers and obedient doers of your word.

Father, I pray that you would enable us to hear. Father, I pray that in this moment that you would enable all of us to posture our hearts to hear. I pray that you would enable us to do this morning. I pray that you would enable us to do this. I pray that you would enable us to do this. And Lord, I pray that above my voice, above my human voice, your divine voice will be heard in this place, in each heart, in each life.

[4 : 53] And Lord, only you can do this. So we trust you to do it in Jesus' name. Amen. This morning we have come to yet another transition in the book of Ecclesiastes.

And here in chapter 5, we see the preacher moving from his general observations, which predominated the first four chapters of Ecclesiastes.

And we see him now transitioning away from observation to direct instruction. Not just sharing observations about life with his audience, but he's now instructing his audience in a direct way.

We see that in these seven verses, he repeatedly uses the personal pronouns you and your.

There's only one other time that he uses you, and that was when he was speaking to himself in chapter 1.

But now he is directly speaking to his audience. He's addressing them directly, no longer in principles that they could apply to their lives in an indirect way, but he's now directly addressing them, and he's giving them commands.

[6 : 07] And also we notice that in the first four chapters of Ecclesiastes, here and there, the preacher mentions God. He refers to God. But here in these opening verses of chapter 5, God is referenced seven times.

Once by the personal pronoun he, and six other times by the word God. He's directly addressing God. So it's not difficult to see what this passage is about.

This passage is really about God. And when we try to consider what the point is that the preacher is trying to make concerning God, I believe it can be grasped from verses 1 and 7.

What he says in verse 1 is, This is a call to take care in how one approaches God.

It is a call to have regard for how God is approached. It is a reminder that God needs to be approached with thoughtfulness and consideration.

[7 : 19] And then in verse 7, the very last command is, God is the one you must fear. So I think from these two verses, we're able to understand what it is the preacher is saying, to find the point in his words.

And here's what I believe the preacher is saying to us in this passage. I believe he's saying to us that true worship of God is founded on true fear of God.

True worship of God is founded on true fear of God. Or to put it another way, if we do not truly fear God, we cannot truly worship God.

And that's why so much of worship really is false worship, because it is not founded on a true fear of God.

So we can actually take it a step further and say that only those who truly know God will truly fear God. And this is true because the evidence that a person does not truly know God is that he or she does not fear God.

[8 : 42] Now you may be wondering what is meant by fearing God. What does it mean to fear God? And here's how I would describe it. I would describe it as fearing God is not something we decide to do.

It is not something we decide to do like praying to God or singing to God. We don't decide, well, I'm going to fear God. Do I sing to God or do I pray to God?

Fearing God is the necessary response of truly knowing God as he is revealed in Scripture. Fearing God is the necessary response of truly knowing God as he is revealed in Scripture.

And notice that I'm not talking about fully knowing God, because we cannot fully know God. God is incomprehensible. We cannot fully know the Lord.

We are the creatures and he is the creator, and he is above us and we are far below him. So we will never fully know God. But we can truly know God.

[9 : 49] And because we can truly know God, we can truly worship God, even though we don't fully know him.

God sufficiently reveals himself in nature and in Scripture that he may be truly known and he may be truly worshipped.

So to fear God, I would say, means to live before God and relate to God in a reverent manner that is informed by and aware of his greatness, his majesty, and his power.

That's what it means to fear God. It means that we will live before God and we will relate to God in a reverent manner, in a manner that is informed of and aware of his greatness, his majesty, and his power.

But with Sean O'Donnell describes it very succinctly. He says, to fear God means a trembling trust. A trembling trust.

[11 : 03] We trust him because we know him, but because we know him as he is revealed in Scripture in all of his greatness and all of his power, there's a trembling. There's a holy awe that comes upon us because of his greatness in the midst of our trusting him.

So perhaps we can conclude it by saying that fearing God means to relate to God in a manner that is mindful of who he truly is.

In this passage before us, the preacher has in view how people of his day worship God. And the two key aspects of worshipping God are listening to God and hearing from his word and then responding to God based on his word.

In its essence, when we reduce worship down to its bare components, it is that. It is approaching God to hear from God and then responding to God in light of what he has spoken to us.

And the way God primarily speaks to us is through his word. Certainly God can speak to us through a prophetic sense, through the voice of others, but the primary way that God speaks to us is through his inscripturated word.

[12:35] And the preacher no doubt saw violations on both scores. He saw violations of people who were more eager to speak to God than to listen to God.

And in particular, because vows were a frequently used part of worship in that day, and certainly in the Old Testament as well, the preacher observed people who were quick to make all kinds of rash vows, to utter rash words that they didn't think about very much or very long.

And they would utter those words to God. And the preacher has those in view. He observed those. People had no intention of fulfilling and keeping their vows.

And so they demonstrated in so doing that they did not truly fear the Lord. But more fundamentally, what the preacher observed was people who demonstrated that they did not truly know God who was the sovereign ruler of the universe because they related to Him in trivial and in flippant ways. They didn't draw near to listen to God and then to obey God. They just came to say things to God and then to go away and not be affected in any way by their encounter with Him.

[14:10] So this morning in our remaining time, I want to consider two aspects of fearing God that the preacher highlights in these seven verses. And they are as relevant to us this morning as they were to the preacher's original audience.

The first aspect of fearing God that the preacher highlights is humility of heart before God. Humility of heart before God.

Notice again how the preacher says it starting in verse 1. Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools for they do not know that they are doing evil.

Do not rash with your mouth nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God for God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few for a dream comes with much business and a fool's voice with many words.

The clear point that the preacher is making in verses 1 through 3 is the need to listen first when we come before God in worship. We're told that in the temple worship under the old covenant sacrifices were actually offered in silence.

[15:37] People would come and they would bring their sacrifices and there was no noise and talk in the midst of it. The sacrifices were offered and then after the offering of sacrifices the silence would be broken by the reading of God's word.

God's word would be read and then God's word would be explained for the people and then the response to that was the people would respond in prayer, they'd respond in singing and sometimes they'd respond by making vows to God.

So the point is to draw near to God, to approach God with a humble heart that is expressed by a bridal tongue and a listening ear. that is an expression of fearing the Lord.

That is an expression of relating to God as He is revealed in Scripture that we draw near to hear what He has to say to us and so we bridle our tongue and we open our ears and the listening that we do is not just listening for listening's sake.

We don't just listen to listen. We listen to obey. We listen to respond to what God is requiring of us and what He says to us.

[16:59] So it is a heart that is postured to obey. That is the way we listen. You see, the opposite of listening that the preacher helps us to see is to offer the sacrifice of fools.

That's what He's saying to us in verse 1. The sacrifice of fools is to be speaking and in particular to be speaking in a hasty manner when we should really be listening before God.

And the preacher tells us why we should listen. The preacher tells us why we should not be so rash coming before God in an irreverent way to talk to God, to make it seem like what we have to say to God is more important than what He has to say to us.

The preacher tells us in the latter part of verse 2. Here's why he counsels us not to be hasty to speak before God.

He says, The preacher is making the point that God is not like us.

[18:13] He is unlike us. He is in heaven. We are on earth. We are humans and we relate to humans. But God is the transcendent one. He is above all. He is over all and He knows all.

And when we realize this and we bear this in mind, we would be ever mindful of our need to hear from God before we speak to God. Now notice that the preacher doesn't command us to be silent forever.

He simply says we should let our words be few. So he's not saying that we are to be forever silent. He's saying let our words be few.

The preacher then concludes this first point about the need for a humble heart before God with this proverb and in it he expresses a principle a proverb in verse 3 where he says for a dream comes with much business and a fool's voice with many words.

It's a proverb. What the preacher is saying is in the same way that having a lot of activities or the NIV says cares that we have to attend to it it results in a more activated dream life and I think many of us could attest to that.

[19 : 35] Sometimes when we have a lot of things going on in our lives our dream life tends to be a bit more active and the preacher says in a very similar way so do many words produce foolish talk.

The point is that when a person is talking a lot and does not listen to God he is bound to say foolish things. He is bound to say things that are not informed from God's perspective.

So fearing God is expressed by approaching him with a humble heart and a bridal tongue and a desire to listen and then to obey.

So the question I believe that we all need to consider this morning is is this the posture of my heart before God? Are you mindful that God is the transcendent one who is above all and over all and who knows all and that he is the one before whom we come to worship and that he is not like us? He is very much unlike us and we therefore ought to approach him in a manner that demonstrates our awareness that he is not like us.

[20 : 56] Or do we view God as the kind of spiritual Santa Claus the one we come before and we read him our list of wishes and desires and all the things we want and we look for him to grant those things to us.

And I think many of us can identify with this reality that so much of our relating to God has to do with giving petitions to God. So much so that if we didn't have petitions we'd hardly talk to God.

what we need brothers and sisters as we hear these words this morning to posture our hearts and quiet our hearts whenever we come before the Lord in worship first to hear from him and then to respond to him in light of what he says to us.

And what the preacher is saying to us is this is an expression of humility and it is an expression of the fear of God. Now once again the preacher is not advocating that we remain silent forever.

As pointed out in verse 3 he simply says let your words be few. And then in verses 4 through 7 he elaborates and he gives us another measurement of fearing God and it is number 2 sincerity of speech toward God.

[22 : 25] sincerity of speech toward God. First humility of heart before God and then second sincerity of speech toward God.

Look at what the preacher says in verses 4 through 6. 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 it was a mistake.

Why should God be angry at your voice and destroy the work of your hands? Again, clearly the issue that the preacher was addressing was the fact that people were making rash vows before God.

they were making vows that they had no intention whatsoever of actually keeping. There was no commitment to do what they vowed.

[23 : 29] And in so doing they are branded as fools. And it's important to note that when the Bible talks about a fool or talks about fools, it is not because they say something foolish based on how we would say that's foolish.

it's not that. When the Bible talks about a fool, the Bible is speaking about a person who does not truly demonstrate an awareness of God and who God really is.

In other words, it's a person whose reality is not sufficiently informed about who God is. And in this particular context with the preacher is saying is those who lack sincerity of speech, those who would come before an all-knowing God, an ever-present God, an all-powerful God, and other things that they have no intention of fulfilling.

The preacher said that's a fool. That's a fool because it is someone who is relating to God in a manner that is inconsistent with who he really is as revealed.

in his word. The fool is someone who is devoid of true knowledge of God. That's why we read in Proverbs 14, 1, it says that the fool says in Psalm 14, 1, sorry, that the fool says in his heart, there is no God.

[25 : 03] He doesn't utter it out loud, but in his heart he is saying, there is no God. So he's living in this absent-minded way without any reference to God.

And that's why that person is a fool. And that's why we can have very educated people who are biblical fools. People who live life and they relate to God in a way that betrays their ignorance of God and who he truly is as revealed in scripture.

And so the preacher gives us several pieces of advice related to making rash vows. Look at the first thing that he says in verse 4. He says, when you make a vow to God, do not delay in paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools.

Pay what you vow. One of the reasons we should not delay in keeping our word is sometimes when we delay in keeping our word, we will not keep our word. And so the preacher says, when you vow to God, you are to pay your vow to God, because the fool is the one who believes that he can utter rash and empty words before God that he has no intention of fulfilling.

We do that to one another, but the preacher is saying, don't do that to God, because God is very much unlike you. His second piece of advice is in verse five, he says, it is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay.

[26 : 46] Now that on its face sounds a bit odd, because we think, well, you know, at least saying that you'll do it, at least that demonstrates something.

No, the preacher says, you're better off not vowing at all than making a vow and not fulfilling it. And first of all, the reason is, it's a voluntary thing.

You're not under any compulsion to make a vow. And the point is, is that God takes our vows seriously and he holds us accountable for them, and therefore it is better that we not vow and not keep it.

And that was a practice that was happening in the preacher's time, and the preacher understood what he received really want. The issue was, these people didn't fear the Lord.

These people were unuttered in these words. God takes our vows, especially those directed to him, very, very seriously.

[27 : 54] And then we were talking a while ago about how sometimes we say, oh God, you know, I want you to do this, and when God does it for us, we quickly turn away and get the company of many witnesses.

And so we have to take our vows seriously and they need to be sincere because they are lived before the face of God.

I want to ask you this morning, let me consider this second point, is your speech towards God sincere?

Are you committed to fulfilling your words and mindful that God is unlike us? And that when we make vows or promises, whether we make them to God or we make them to someone else, that we are to fulfill them.

I wonder this morning whether there are perhaps vows that we have made to God or to someone else, promises as well that are yet to be fulfilled. But you know, time doesn't deal with it.

[29 : 08] Time doesn't deal with it. Many times that is the patience of the Lord, the long suffering of the Lord. There's nothing that says that when we don't immediately fulfill that vow, that God's anger is poured out upon us.

And sometimes that is what misleads some of us, that because God's response and his disapproval is not immediate, that we think it's okay.

No, the Bible says we should not consider the long suffering of the Lord as slackness. But God is trying to bring us to a place of repentance.

repentance. Now notice how the preacher ends in verse 7, how he concludes this section of the book.

He concludes with the command, God is the one you must fear. God is the one you must fear.

[30 : 11] The preacher has instructed his audience about having a humble heart before God, having sincere speech before God, and then he says God is the one that you must fear.

And again, his point is, behind it all, behind an insincere heart, behind a heart that is not humble, behind a heart that makes words that are just empty, and we tell people what we think they want to

hear, he says, behind all of that is a person who does not fear the Lord.

God has revealed himself in both nature and in his word that he is to be feared. I don't know if some of you heard the thundering yesterday as the weather was changing all over.

It's just a reminder of the sheer power and majesty of God. When we read God's word and we come across an account like that of Ananias and Sapphira, it is a reminder that God is to be feared.

He's not to be trifled with. He's not to be played with. And so the preacher commands us, God is the one you must fear. But you know there's actually a problem with this command that the preacher gives.

[31 : 36] The preacher is actually issuing a command that is impossible to be fulfilled by any human being in and of him or herself.

Scripture tells us that Jesus, when he was on the road to Emmaus, as he had been resurrected and he met these two disciples who were sorrowful and who didn't recognize him, the scripture says that what Jesus did for them was Jesus beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he opened the scriptures and taught them the things concerning himself.

And of course we don't know how Jesus did that. But I suppose that one of the things that Jesus could have done is he could have come to passages like this one.

And he could have shown those disciples, this is why I had to come. I had to come because you need to fear God.

Men and women need to fear God and they can't fear God in and of themselves. Turn with me to Romans chapter 3. Romans chapter 3.

[33 : 05] I want to start at verse 9. The Apostle Paul is making a case that no one is righteous, whether Jew or Gentile.

They're all the same. They're under sin and none is righteous. This is what he says starting in verse 9. What then? Are Jews any better off?

No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin. As it is written, none is righteous, no, not one.

No one understands. No one seeks for God. All have turned aside together. They have become worthless. No one does good, not even one.

Their throat is an open grave. They use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips. Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.

[34 : 10] Their feet are swift to shed blood. In their paths are ruin and misery. And the way of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes.

This is a condition of every single human being without exception. We don't see God. we don't understand God. None of us is righteous.

And the final point that he makes in verse 18 is there is no fear of God before their eyes. Yet the preacher calls his audience to fear the Lord.

And so when we look to the Old Testament, the Old Testament not only predicts the coming of Jesus, but the Old Testament also helps us to see why Jesus had to come.

And this one of we come face to face with one of the reasons that he had to come. He had to come to enable us to be able to fear God. And the way he enables us to fear God is through his death, through his first of all his obedient life that he lived, and then his sacrificial death that he died, and through that death God is able to forgive sinners and reconcile them back to himself.

[35 : 33] God is able to cause them to be born again. He is able to cause them to be able to fear the Lord. Not fully but truly.

Not perfectly but sufficiently. And brothers and sisters, this is our only hope this morning. If you this morning in your heart of hearts are aware that you do fear the Lord, you are aware that you live a life that is mindful of God as he is revealed in scripture, you live a life that doesn't play games to think that there are things you wouldn't do in the sight of other people, but you would walk away and alone in seclusion, you would do the very same thing.

If you don't do that, if you are mindful that you are before the face of God, even when you are alone, that is the grace and mercy of God that has only become possible through Jesus Christ and the sacrificial death that he died on behalf of sinners.

Prior to that, it was the mere command that dogged us and daunted us and we could never fulfill. The people of the preacher's day were called to this.

God is the one you are to fear, but they could never do it. And so they continued along with their rash vows and their sincere hearts before God.

[37 : 04] But only through the coming of Jesus Christ and his life and death for sinners and making it possible for God to transform their hearts and give them a new heart and to give them new desires.

God is the only way that we can fulfill that. And so this morning if you are aware that you are living with the fear of God, that you are living this informed understanding of this great and grand and majestic, all-knowing, omnipotent God, this holy God who is other than we are, who is above us and above this world, if we're living with any measure of awareness of that God and living in light of that, we have received the mercy of God in our lives.

And if you aren't, and if you are relating to God as if he were some idol, where you would be in his presence and not even be aware of it or relate to him as if he did not exist, recognize that you need the mercy and grace of God expressed in your life through saving faith in Jesus Christ to be able to truly fear the Lord.

See again, brothers and sisters, when we live our lives and we are more conscious of human beings, there are things we will not do in the sight of human beings. that we could turn away and do in the sight of God.

We don't know God and we don't fear God. But it is possible to know him and it's possible to fear him through the Lord Jesus Christ.

[39 : 06] And so I pray this morning that there are two reactions in this room, those who are rejoicing in the mercy and the grace of God that has enabled them to live with the fear of God.

And then for those who aren't having that particular response to God's word this morning, my prayer is that you would see your desperate need for God. That you would see and recognize that without God, without his help, without his transforming work in your heart, you will fit the description of what the apostle Paul refers to in Romans chapter 3, there is no fear of God in their eyes.

And I pray that you would cry out this morning to God that he would have mercy and that he would enable you to fear him and to live life before him that demonstrates that fear.

The truth this morning though is that none of us fears the Lord perfectly. None of us will ever fear the Lord perfectly.

There's one who feared God perfectly. There's one who listened and obeyed every single thing that God has said.

[40 : 40] And there is one who wherever we fail, wherever we fall short in our fear of God, there's one who has succeeded in fully and perfectly fearing the Lord.

And he not only died for those of us who put our trust in him, he also lived for us. And so he has perfectly feared the Lord. And therefore, that is credited to our account.

So when we stand before the Lord, he would consider, because of Jesus, that we have lived lives that perfectly fear him.

Now this is not a call to just say, well, Jesus did it and so I don't need to try. No, this is a call to God's We still continue to exert grace-motivated efforts to grow in the fear of the Lord, because we can grow in the fear of the Lord.

And the primary way is to see him more and more as he is revealed in his word. And so I pray this morning as we consider these words of the preacher, that we are aware of the amazing grace that God has brought to us in the new covenant, that this impossibility of fearing the Lord is now made possible through the Lord Jesus Christ.

[42 : 09] Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we thank you this morning for your word. And Lord, I do pray that we are mindful this morning, that only those who know you can truly fear you, and only those who truly fear you will truly worship you.

I pray, Lord, that you would continue to speak to our hearts, cause us to grow in our knowledge of you and our fear of you.

Those who don't know Jesus Christ, would you bring conviction of sin, and Lord, the same saving grace that you've extended to the rest of us, would you extend to those who this morning stand outside of Jesus Christ.

Pray that you would do this in Jesus' name. Amen. Let's stand together. We're going to up. Yes, Yes, Yes,! Yes,! Yes,! Yes,