

"Performative Religion"

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Preacher: Matt Coburn

[0 : 00] I promised you I'd start each sermon in the Ecclesiastes series with a classic rock song, but I failed this morning. In a Barna survey of former churchgoers from 2014, Kerry Newhoff reports that these are the top reasons why people no longer attend church.

First, irrelevance, hypocrisy, and moral failure. Second, God is missing in church. Third, legitimate doubt is prohibited. Fourth, they're not learning about God. Five, they're not finding community. Now, this is a survey that focused on those who were former churchgoers, those who had attended for a while and experienced these disappointments.

They went to church seeking meaning, hope, love, forgiveness, something, spiritually hungry, and they found that they did not find what they were looking for.

And the disappointment is doubly so, right? Because if you can't find those things in church, good heavens, where can you find them? This, of course, is the experience not only of those who have been to church, but also of those who visit churches, those who have a spiritual interest or hunger.

[1 : 33] And they're looking and they sometimes go to church and find these similar dynamics. Raising a question in our hearts when we walk into the house of God, what might we find?

This is the question that the writer of Ecclesiastes wants us to wrestle with this morning. So, we're going to look at the beginning of chapter 5, verses 1 through 7.

And that's on page 520 in the Pew Bible. If you want to turn there, that's where you can find it. And remember, as we turn there and look to the Scriptures, that what we've seen in chapters 1 through 4 is this.

The writer of Ecclesiastes is leading us on a journey seeking for meaning. And his conclusion may be summed up in chapter 1, verse 14, where he says this, I've seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.

He keeps looking in different places in work and pleasure and wisdom, understanding, even in the halls of justice. And he finds not substance, not meaning, not life, not eternal things, but empty, meaningless, insubstantial, and ephemeral life.

[2 : 58] And he's on this journey going, where can I find this? And where do I go? And what do I do? Will we find vanity? Or is there something better? And today he says, when I go into the house of the Lord, will I find vanity or will there be something better?

This is what we're talking about this morning in our passage. So let's pray and ask for God's help, and then we'll read the passage together. Lord, we do come to you this morning, Lord, humbly acknowledging how easily, Lord, we don't worship you.

How easily we fall short of what you would have us do. And Lord, we also confess our disappointments, Lord, and our struggles.

Lord, where we have come and left feeling empty. Lord, we pray this morning that you would help us through your word.

Lord, I pray for your help that you would help me to speak the words as I ought to. Lord, that we would together sit under your word and receive it and respond to it as you would have us do.

[4 : 12] We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Ecclesiastes 5, 1 through 7 says this. 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. Be 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.

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 work of your hands?

[5 : 18] For when dreams increase and words grow many, there is vanity. But God is the one you must fear. In the house of God, will we find vanity or something better?

As with these other topics, as we've tried to explore them as he leads us on this journey, the writer Caholet, if you remember, that's what his name is, preacher, teacher, whatever, in chapter 1, however you want to translate it.

He gives us a realistic view of the house of God under the sun. He describes the vanity of religion, and he suggests that there may be something more for us to find.

So, we're going to look at those two things in sequence. First, in the house of God, you will find vain religion. Now, I wanted to find my term here because religion is a word that might be used in various different ways.

It might be used to say religion reflects the basic human impulse to seek spiritual truth. It might be the formal communal belief system. So, a religion would be Islam or Hinduism or Christianity.

[6 : 31] If you read older Christian writings, the Puritans and people like that, they will talk about religion in a very positive way as meaning faithful Christian orthodoxy. So, we just need to be careful.

I don't mean really any of these things. What I mean by religion is the human activities that one might do in order to achieve a standing before God or other human beings.

Religion is spiritual practices that are doing things in order to gain something from others. And, of course, it's challenging because as we look at people from the outside, we don't know why they're doing it.

So, we always need to be careful and humble about our judgmental attitudes towards others when we see them. But we need to recognize that there is this religious impulse to do things in order to gain meaningful life in the words of Ecclesiastes or in the broader words of the Scriptures to gain our salvation with God.

And Koholet is warning us about the reality of vain religion in the house of God. He talks about three things. He talks about sacrifices. He talks about prayer.

[7 : 46] And he talks about vows. In verse 1, he talks about the sacrifices of fools. And why are they foolish? Because they don't know what they're doing and they don't know why they're doing it.

And I think that underneath it, there is an impulse. We do these sacrifices not coming to God knowing our desperate need and wanting to receive from Him, but rather to perform for God to build ourselves up by doing the things that we would do.

And we might do this consciously. I know God needs me to do these things so that I'm okay with Him. God requires this. It may be that we do these things because we don't know any better, because we're just following along with the traditions that we grew up with.

All of these things are possible. Think about the sacrifices that we bring in our modern Protestant church, our singing, our giving, our listening to the Word of God.

Do we do this with the spirit of saying, I checked a box today. I went to church. God is pleased with me. I gave. Isn't that good enough?

[8 : 57] I served. Isn't that good enough? I sung. Isn't that good enough? God, now aren't you pleased with me? Will you now give me what I want? This seems to be the heart that Koholet is revealing in the sacrifice of fools.

And we need to ask ourselves, do we do the same? Now, Koholet's audience is not just words. It seems that he's getting at the thought that is common, that if we pray more or pray louder or pray with more energy or more ecstasy or more fervency, that God listens to us more because of our more words.

But this reveals to us, doesn't it, that we think that our prayer is somehow going to manipulate or move God to do something that he wouldn't want to do.

Or it's to look good before God or others by saying, look at what a great prayer I am by my many words. And then he goes on in verses 4 through 6 and he talks about vows.

[10 : 12] Now, vows in the Old Testament often came along with sacrifices. The thought was, if I make a sacrifice and I make a vow to worship God or to do something for God, then he will respond to me.

The idea here is a little bit of like the foxhole vows that we make. God, if you get me out of this circumstance, I will do X. I will stop drinking. I will go to church every Sunday.

I will give 50% of my income to the church. I will, whatever it is, we make these outrageous vows in an attempt to get something from God.

Now, look, it's great to be zealous. And there are times when God calls us to make commitments for Him, but we need to be careful. I am a card-carrying member of the Bachelor to the Rapture Club. When I was a sophomore in college, me and my friends founded the Bachelor to the Rapture Club because we thought it was the vow that we needed to make to really focus on Jesus and not think about girls at all.

[11 : 24] It's ridiculous, right? This is a rash vow. I do not recommend this as a path for those of you young men who are thinking about it, or young women who are thinking this might make sense.

Look, I'm not going to go down that rabbit hole. I'm just going to say, this was a rash vow. Within a year, I was dating. Maybe you have made vows like New Year's resolutions.

I'm going to read the Bible every day. I'm going to read through the Bible in a year. We need to be careful because this zeal, though it is a normal human impulse, it is not actually worship to God, but it is vain religion because it ends up being about, I need to perform this.

And when we fail, we dishonor God. This is what he says in 4 through 7. If we fail, we don't reflect a God who keeps His promises, a God who is truth, a God who always is yes and amen to the things that He has said that He would do.

And we, we have a tendency to say, oh, I didn't really mean that, God. We excuse it. When someone challenges on, did you follow through with it? So he says we need to be careful because these vows are so often another expression of this vain religion.

[12 : 50] religion, this vain religion that says, if I do these things, God will see me and He will think something of me because I do them.

I will gain standing with Him. I will gain even my salvation with Him. Right? There are some churches that would teach, you must do certain rituals, certain practices in order to be saved.

There are certainly world religions that would say the same thing. This is the heart for Koholet of vain religion.

So we've been warned when you come into the house of God, and I don't mean out there, I also mean in here, we've been warned of the danger of vain religion.

How do we respond to this? Now, some of us come to church, and we've found it to be an incredibly wonderful, life-giving experience.

[14 : 02] And we respond to this kind of description defensively. No, no, that's not what it is. That's not what I've experienced. Church has been life for me. It's been such a wonderful place.

I worship God when I go to church, and it's been such a good thing. And while I am sympathetic to this response, and I pray that this would be true of our church and of our gathering, I want us to reflect and ask the question that Koholet is asking us.

To what degree is our worship vain? Are our church practices empty? Do we gravitate towards checking boxes or worshiping that's more about me than about God?

It's more about my experience rather than the reality of God. It's more about my preferences than the Word of God. It's more about my reputation than the reputation of God.

It's more about my spiritual success than the glory of Christ. We need to ask ourselves that question in our own hearts individually and for ourselves corporately.

[15 : 16] Do we promote or do we cherish or do we allow our hearts to fall into this vain worship? But secondly, there are some of us who are here, but we've already felt the sting of disappointment because we've come to church with high ideals, great expectations, desires, and we come in here and we think, oh no, this church isn't that at all or it's not enough for me and I feel disappointed.

I feel hurt because I thought this church was going to give me something that I wanted it to give me and it didn't. And to you, I would say, recognize that Koholet is warning us this will be true.

Now, there's hope for you. We'll get to that as we go on in our sermon. But recognize that your idealism may not reflect the reality of life under the sun.

And if you remember in Ecclesiastes, life under the sun is without reference to God. And in life under the sun, we do live under it and we may be subject to it. And there are some of us, and of course, this is a danger because I'm probably preaching to the wrong people about this, but there are some of us who will dismiss church altogether because of that disappointment.

But there probably aren't here. But if you are here and you're tempted because you see the whole thing as a show of hypocrisy, because you have experienced the depth of that disappointment to a point where you just think you want to cast it all off, recognize that what Kohelet is saying is prepared for the reality of what you will find, but also hear the call of God and what God's Word says about what it can be and what it should be.

[17 : 20] Because God's Word says more than just this about entering into the house of God and what we will find. So, for instance, regarding sacrifices, hear what David wrote in Psalm 40, verses 6 through 8.

He said, In sacrifice and offerings you have not delighted, but you have given me an open ear. Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required.

And then I said, Behold, I have come in the scroll of the book. It is written of me. I delight to do your will. Oh, my God. Your law is within my heart.

Now, David lived in the time of the temple. He sacrificed at the temple. It's not that temple sacrifices didn't happen. But what David shows is what God really cared about in the Old Testament as well as in the New Testament is our heart posture to delight to come to the Lord, to receive from Him, and to do His will because He gives us and instructs us and shows us the path of life that He has given us.

Or remember the words that Jesus spoke in the Sermon on the Mount regarding prayer in Matthew 6, verses 5 through 8. And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners that they may be seen by others.

[18 : 47] Truly I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.

You see, vain religion isn't about relating to a heavenly Father. It's about trying to please some divine monarch, some dispassionate ruler.

But Jesus says, you come and worship a heavenly Father who hears your words, who knows what you need, and who loves. So come to Him humbly, knowing that you can't manipulate Him from your prayer, but that by your prayer you express your need for Him and allow Him to meet you in that moment.

So the Bible says there's something better. There's something better with God. The passage that George read earlier, the parable of the wheat and the weeds is a really striking one, right?

[20 : 07] Because the parable is about God planting the seed of the good news of the kingdom of God in the world and in the church, and then as He plants it, there's another seed sown, and so the wheat and the weeds grow up.

And the servants say, well, should we just destroy it all? Should we try to purify this now? Should we clear this field so that it can be only wheat? And God says, no, because if we do that, the wheat that is there will be destroyed.

So instead of destroying that wheat, we will allow the weeds for a time, and then in the harvest, when it comes, we will separate out the wheat and the weeds, and the weeds will be burned up.

They will suffer judgment and condemnation. But for the wheat, there is a gathering into the barns of the Master brought into the household of God.

And this is the picture that He gives. Jesus says in the end, God will judge all vain religion. And He will recognize true worship.

[21 : 26] And He goes on to say, and the kingdom of God, that true worship is like a mustard seed that grows unseen and unlooked for.

But it will produce a harvest unbelievably great. And God is doing these things. And so, as we go back to Ecclesiastes, does He say these things?

Does He point us in these directions? Well, I think He does in two places in our passage. Look with me in verse 2. Be 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. God is the sovereign creator of all things. And He hates vain religion.

He hates your posturing, your pride, your religious performance. He hates the religious pretense. And He will shut the mouths of those who babble foolish prayers.

[22 : 33] He will reject the sacrifices of those who do not listen and obey His Word. in chapter 5, verse 7, He says, for when dreams increase and words grow many, there is vanity, but God is the one you must fear.

And we will see this thread pulled throughout all of Ecclesiastes that though life under the sun is full of vanity and emptiness, there is a way forward and it has to do with God and with fearing Him and fear not in an abject, terrified way, but in an awe-filled wonder at how great the God who is the creator and the sustainer and the redeemer of all things is.

He is altogether righteous in His judgments. He is awesome in His majesty and His power and we stand in awe of Him because He is not under the sun, but He is the one who created all of life. And He is not only the creator and judge, but He is the redeemer. In the fall, our hearts are bent towards vain religion. We seek to make ourselves right before God, but He has been working out a plan of redemption that would do something remarkably different to redeem us and to free us for true worship.

So, Jesus reminds the Samaritan woman in John 4, you remember, He meets the Samaritan woman at the well and she, after having had her sin exposed by Him, she's like, well, what about worship?

[24 : 19] Where can we worship? And Jesus says to her, woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father.

You worship what you do not know, we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming and is now here when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship Him.

God is spirit and those who worship Him must worship Him in spirit and truth. And the woman said to Him, I know that Messiah is coming, He who is called Christ. When He comes, He will tell us all things.

And Jesus said to her, I who speak to you am He. You see, friends, this is God's plan. This is God's hope for His house is that Jesus has come to make a house that is full of people who worship Him in spirit and in truth to rescue us from our vain religion.

How can He do this? Because of what the writer in Hebrews 10, 5 through 10 says. Listen to these words. Consequently, when Christ came into the world, He said, sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me.

[25 : 40] In burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.

And when He said above, you have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings. These are offered according to the law. Then He added, behold, I have come to do your will.

He does away with the first in order to establish the second. And by that will, we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

This, friends, is the good news of the gospel that Jesus has come and done the offering that is necessary for us to be right with God so that we no longer have to work and our worship is no longer performance but response because Jesus went to the cross and died on the cross for our sins.

He did the work that was necessary for our forgiveness and for our redemption. Because He rose from the dead, He is able to give us new and spiritual life which will last for eternity, which frees us from the deadness of human religion so that we can worship Him in this new life filled with the Holy Spirit so that we might worship Him as we ought to in response to all that He has done.

[27 : 04] This is the good news of the gospel. And this is our freedom from vain religion. And Lord, may it be true that Trinity is a house where this gospel truth is like a fountain that overflows in our hearts individually and as a community.

Now, as we close, we're going to observe the Lord's Supper. And I want to take a few minutes to talk about the Lord's Supper because is there no other place in our worship service that we are most prone to vain religion than this?

Right? It would be so easy for us to come and to eat the bread and to drink the cup believing that God accepts us because we are taking communion rather than taking communion because God

has already accepted us.

It would be so easy for us to believe that taking communion will move God to bless us and do good for us and answer our particular prayers rather than taking communion because He has already blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

It would be easy for us to not take communion because we think I'm unworthy. I'm too imperfect. My sin is great and I don't think I can do this rather than coming to the very place where we recognize and remember the forgiveness of our sin achieved in Christ.

[28 : 44] It would be easy for us to think that we take communion because if we don't God won't save us rather than taking communion because He has saved us.

Listen to the words of institution. This is what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 11. For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you that the Lord Jesus on the night He was betrayed took bread and when He had given thanks He broke it and said this is my body which is for you do this in remembrance of me and in the same way also He took the cup after supper saying this cup is a new covenant in my blood do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me for as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.

This is why we do this we do this to remember to remember His body broken for us His blood that was shed for us and the redemption that He has done and as we respond we ought to ask the Holy Spirit to help us maybe we will feel joy because we have remembered that God has rescued us from sin in Christ we may feel thankfulness because of the costly love that Jesus showed we may feel conviction of sin because we haven't put God in the middle of our lives or in the middle of our worship we may feel strength in God's presence that God who has rescued us will continue to strengthen us to pursue Him even through great trials whatever it is the heart not the ritual is the goal and as we come to the table my prayer is that we will worship Him in spirit and truth this morning is the