

The wise man and the fool in the house of 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: 08 September 2024

Preacher: Richard Fettes

[0 : 0 0] He's carrying on the series that John Lowry's been doing in the evenings, which is going to take us to the next part. So we're looking at Ecclesiastes chapter 5.

If you want to turn there. Just the first seven verses of Ecclesiastes chapter 5. That's the one after Proverbs. Ecclesiastes 5, verse 1 says, 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 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. As a dream comes when there are many cares, so the speech of a fool when there are many words.

When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools. Fulfill your vow. It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not to fulfill it.

[1 : 0 7] Do not let your mouth lead you into sin. I 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, standing awe of God. Amen. May God bless his word to us this evening. Leading so well tonight and picking all the hymns.

When you've got something like Ecclesiastes to study, it's nice to get that at least taken off your hands. I must tell you a wee story. On Friday and Saturday, staying over Friday night, I was at the Scottish Baptist Lay Preachers Association annual get-together, shindig, whatever you call it, or retreat.

And we had a keynote speaker all lined up. And a day and a half before the event, he went sick with COVID.

And he had to find a replacement at rather short notice. So this gentleman called Kenny came along. And he had this surname, Roxburgh.

[2 : 2 4] And I thought to myself, No. No. Can't be. Can't be. But we were playing tempered bowling on Friday night. And he was in my team.

I won in my team, by the way. Anyway, that's another story. And he said to me, Richard, this is what church do you go to? I said, Westerhills Baptist Church. Oh, you'll know my brother. So it's a small world.

But he's a great guy. We had a great time. And very much appreciated, you know. But he did say that he can't play a musical instrument at all. That's not his gift. Not like his big brother here.

Now, okay. So we're continuing in Ecclesiastes 5, 1-7. Let me ask you a quick question. If Solomon was here today and was the compare of a quiz program, what do you think it would be?

Which one would he compare? It should be obvious. Pointless. Pointless. Because we've got all this stuff about meaningless, meaningless.

[3 : 38] Okay. Well, despite all the negativity that the teacher, this is the guy who's writing Ecclesiastes, despite all the negativity that the teacher expresses in the opening chapters of Ecclesiastes about the meaningless of life, he does come to some positive conclusions.

For instance, when applying himself to the understanding of wisdom and madness and folly, he concludes in verse 13 of chapter 2 that wisdom is better than folly.

And by the time we get to chapter 5, he's in a much more positive frame of mind. The questioning of the previous chapters has led surprisingly to conclusions. And from his conclusions, he offers to us, in this passage, positive advice and instruction.

The theme of wisdom and folly, however, is very much still in evidence as he contrasts the approach of the wise man or the wise woman with that of the fool when both come to the house of God.

Our passage, it might be helpful for you to have a look at your Bibles as we're going along, our passage is divided into three sections with a short conclusion at the end.

[4 : 58] Verse 1 covers the first section. Here, advice for the wise person's conduct in the house of God is contrasted with the approach of the fool. Now, I don't like to call anybody a fool because Jesus said, you know, it's not good to call your brother a fool because you're in danger of hellfire, but I'm going to use the language of the teacher.

So, hopefully I'll get off with that. Well, verse 2 and verse 3 is the second section. The focus here is on prayer and again, the fool. Still in God's house, verses 4 to 6 is the third section, which is about making...

Here too, the wise person and the fool show us that there is a right way and a wrong way to do 7 as the short conclusion. Before we begin, let me just say something about this phrase, the house of God.

When I first read the passage in preparation for tonight, the thought occurred to me, if Solomon was the author of Ecclesiastes, why didn't he say, guard your steps when you go to the temple of God?

For before his time, God's dwelling amongst his people was the tabernacle, but Solomon built a magnificent temple for the Lord. However, looking into it, I discovered that according to 1 Kings, after his kingdom was firmly established and God had given him wisdom greater than anyone ever before him, as well as riches and honour, it was four years before Solomon began the construction of the temple.

[6 : 35] And as it took another seven years to complete it, it's quite possible that he wrote these words in the intervening period, which is why he refers to the house of God and not the temple.

Now that's just conjecture on my part, but whatever the case may be, I am glad that the teacher said, guard your steps when you go to the house of God, because that could mean the tabernacle, the temple, or in later time the synagogue, or even a church like this one.

In fact, God's house is wherever he chooses it to be, for everything belongs to him anyway. Take the story of Jacob in Genesis chapter 28, for example.

After Jacob stole Esau's birthright and Isaac sent him off to Haran, we read that when he reached a certain place and stopped for the night, he lay down to sleep and dreamt that he saw a stairway connecting heaven to earth with the angels of God ascending and descending on it.

There above it stood the Lord who spoke with him, confirming to him the promises that he had made to Abraham and Isaac before him. In verses 16 and 17 we read, When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, Surely the Lord is in this place and I was not aware of it.

- [7 : 54] He was afraid and said, How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God. This is the gate of heaven. Early the next morning, Jacob took the stone he had placed under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it.
- He called that place Bethel, which of course means house of God, though the city used to be called Luz. The teacher says in verse 1, Guard your steps when you go to the house of God.
- Like Jacob of old, the wise person has his eyes open to the fact that God's house is an awesome place and he must therefore tread carefully and respectfully.
- He is aware that where two or three are gathered together in Jesus' name, there he is in the midst. He will endeavor to come on time and to come with a heart prepared for worship.
- He knows too that although he is welcome, nevertheless, that doesn't give him license to do as he pleases any more than the invitation to make himself at home when he visits someone gives him license to take advantage of his host by helping himself to his food and drink.
- [9 : 11] For that is not what anyone means when they say make yourself at home. But just to complicate things further, God's house is not just a place but a people.
- In 1 Peter, chapter 2, verses 4 and 5, it says this, as you come to him, Jesus, the living stone, rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him, you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house.
- Hebrews 3, verse 6 says, but Christ is faithful as a son over God's house and we are his house if indeed we hold firmly to our confidence and the hope in which we glory.
- the wise person will treat God's house and God's people with equal respect. In contrast with that is the ignorance of foolish people who in offering the sacrifice of fools, verse 1 says, do not know that they do wrong.
- In Leviticus 10, we have the story of Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu who, we are told, took their censers, put fire in them and added incense and they offered unauthorized fire before the Lord contrary to his command even though they were priests.
- [10 : 37] So, verse 2 says, fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them and they died before the Lord. Their sin was the sin of presumption and although they didn't know they were doing wrong, they still paid the price for their actions.
- There are those in churches today who, like them, presume upon the grace of God. They mistakenly think that New Testament believers are immune from similar judgment.
- They forget, concerning communion, for instance, which we, of course, celebrated this morning, that 1 Corinthians chapter 11 verses 29 to 30 says, for those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves.
- That is why, says Paul, many among you are weak and sick and a number of you have fallen asleep. And that's a euphemism for death.
- When you go to the house of God, says the teacher, go near to listen. It's been said that God gave you one mouth but two ears for a reason.
- [11 : 52] So here's a little video that explains better than I can just what it means to listen. Thank you, Daniel. For thousands of years, every morning and evening, Jewish people have prayed these well-known words as a way of expressing their devotion to God.
- They're called the Shema. Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one. And as for you, you shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart, with all of your soul, and with all of your strength.

Now the first word of the Shema is hear, or listen, which in Hebrew is pronounced Shema. That's where the prayer gets its name. Now Shema is a really common word in the Hebrew Bible and it's obvious why.

Hearing is a very universal activity. It's usually connected with the ear, as in Proverbs chapter 20, ears that Shema and eyes that see, the Lord has made them both. Now that seems basic enough, but if you look at the other ways that Hebrew authors can use the word Shema, they use it to mean more than just let sound waves enter your ear.

In Hebrew, Shema can also mean pay attention to or focus on. So when Leah, who wasn't loved by her husband Jacob, she has a son and she names him Simon or in Hebrew, Shem'on, because she says, the Lord has Shema, that I am unloved.

[13 : 15] So Shema means to hear and to pay attention to and even more. It can also mean responding to what you hear. This is why so many of the cries for help in the book of Psalms begin with a call that God listen.

Psalms 27, verse 7, Shema my voice when I call, O Lord. Be merciful. Answer me. So asking God to Shema is at the same time asking God to act, to do something.

It's similar to when God asks people to listen. Like when the people of Israel come to Mount Sinai, God says, if you Shema me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all the nations you will be my treasured possession.

Now there's a couple interesting things about this verse in Exodus. In Hebrew, the word Shema is repeated twice in this sentence to give it emphasis. If you Shema Shema, meaning listen closely.

But also notice that from God's point of view, listening is basically the same as keeping the covenant. So when God asks the people to Shema, what he means is that they listen and obey.

[14 : 16] And that's the last fascinating thing about Shema. In ancient Hebrew, there is no separate word for obey, meaning to carry out the wishes of someone who knows better than you or is in authority over you.

So in the Bible, if you want to say, I will listen and do what you say, you use the single word, Shema. In Hebrew, listening and doing are two sides of the same coin.

This is why later in Israel's history, when the people were breaking their covenant promises to God, the Hebrew prophets would say things like, they have ears, but they're not listening. The Israelites, of course, could hear just fine, but they weren't actually listening or else they would act differently.

And so in the end, listening in the Bible is about giving respect to the ones speaking to you and doing what they say. Real listening takes effort and action.

And that's the Hebrew word, Shema. There you go. Did you like that? That was very good. The wise person comes into God's house guardedly and with the intention to listen and learn rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, as it says in verse 1.

[15 : 27] This phrase, the sacrifice of fools, is a very striking phrase. Here are some examples of what that means. Praise and worship as a substitute for obedience is the sacrifice of fools.

In 1 Samuel chapter 15, we read how God commanded Saul to make war against the Amalekites and to destroy them totally, man and beast, for what they did to Israel when they came out of Egypt.

But Saul failed to do all that he was commanded. When Samuel found him afterwards, Saul said, I have carried out the Lord's instructions. But Samuel said, What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears?

What is this lowing of cattle that I hear? Saul answered, The soldiers brought them from the Amalekites. They spared the best of the sheep and the cattle to sacrifice to the Lord your God.

but we totally destroyed the rest. But Samuel replied, Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifice as much as in obeying the Lord?

[16 : 35] To obey is better than sacrifice and to heed is better than the fat of rams. Prayer 2, where there is unrepentant sin, is the sacrifice of fools.

David says in Psalm 66 in verse 18, If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened. Sacrificing to an idol is also the sacrifice of a fool.

Cautioning the Corinthians against idol worship, Paul says in 1 Corinthians chapter 10 verses 19 and 20, Do I mean that food sacrificed to an idol is anything?

Or that an idol is anything? No. But the sacrifice of pagans are offered to demons, not to God. Here's another example of the sacrifice of fools, if we can get that picture up.

You might recognise this picture, it's of Tibetan prayer wheels. They contain long strips of rolled up paper on which mantras are written. Now according to Tibetan Buddhist tradition, spinning such wheels by hand will have much the same meritorious effect as orally reciting the prayers.

[17 : 57] If you think that encourages laziness, some of them even have little windmills on top of them or are driven by water so that you don't even have to touch them by hand.

Mind you, I'm down for prayers of intercession next Sunday. think of the preparation time I could save myself if I could bring along a little prayer wheel like that old lady has and just spin it a few times will save a lot of work.

Let's look at verse 2 and 3 now which deals with prayer in the house of God. 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. These verses, according to some commentators, are a cautious reminder to the wise to avoid lengthy prayers in the public gatherings.

Just as we are told to be careful of our conduct when we come to God's house, so also we are told to be careful how we pray. The teacher highlights two things not to do and one thing to do.

[19 : 09] Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart. Do let your words be few. Now a word of caution here, prayers of intercession on a Sunday morning are an exception.

Although they too should not be too long, they will of necessity be longer than normal prayers for obvious reasons. When it comes to praying aloud in church, I think that the words that are often read to newlyweds during the marriage ceremony offer the perfect advice if we just substitute the word marriage with the word prayer.

Prayer is not to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly, but reverently, deliberately, and in accordance with the purposes for which it was instituted by God.

Let's hear that again. Prayer is not to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly, but reverently, deliberately, and in accordance with the purposes for which it was instituted by God.

Now in contrast, the foolish person, however, thinks that prayer was instituted so that they can impress others with their spirituality. Unaware that Jesus condemned as hypocrites those who in his day prayed openly on the street corners for that very reason.

[20 : 32] nor was it instituted to impress God as the Pharisee thought when he prayed in the temple. I thank you, God, that I am not like other men.

Verse 3 says, A dream comes when there are many cares and many words mark the speech of a fool. Just as dreams are a sign of a troubled sleep brought about by many concerns, so someone who is prone to pray long in public or ramble on unnecessarily exposes himself as a foolish person.

In Matthew, chapter 6 and verse 7, Jesus tells his disciples, When you pray, do not keep on babbling like the pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words.

Commenting on someone who prayed long in his church, the great Victorian preacher Charles Harden Spurgeon said, He prayed me into the Spirit. And then he prayed me out again.

Proverbs 17, verse 28 says, Even a fool is considered wise if he keeps silent. Our third section, verse 46, deals with making vows or promises to God.

[21 : 50] When you make a vow to God, says the teacher, 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 to 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?

The righteous person fulfills his vows to God. According to Psalm 15, verse 4, such a person keeps an oath even when it hurts and does not change their mind.

We read in Judges chapter 11 of Jephthah's vow. It was a rash vow. Nevertheless, although his vow would have far-reaching consequences for his only child or daughter, he kept his word and honored his vow to God.

In 1505, Martin Luther was riding home in a violent thunderstorm. Lightning struck so close to him that he was thrown off his horse.

[23 : 02] Fearing for his life, he cried out, Help me, St. Anne, whoever St. Anne is. I will become a monk. Having recently received a master's degree in philosophy, he was destined for law school.

But to the bitter disappointment of his father, he kept his word and entered a monastery. The rest, as they say, is history. But how might the history of the church have been different if he had not kept his promise?

Would we be here today? It is better, says the teacher, not to make a vow than to make one and not fulfill it. The foolish trash vows are promises to God only to regret them afterwards.

My vow, he says in verse 6, was a mistake. Why should God be angry at what you say and destroy the work of your hands? For some foolish vows made before God, there is no get-out clause.

Esau, we are told in Genesis 25, swore an oath when he sold his birthright to his brother Jacob. Afterwards, the author of Hebrews tells us when he wanted to inherit his blessing, he was rejected.

[24 : 20] Even though he sought the blessing with tears, he could not change what he had done. The conclusion of all this, says the teacher in verse 7, much dreaming and many words are meaningless.

Therefore, fear God. If you want to be wise and not foolish, fear God. for the fear of God, says the scripture, is the beginning of wisdom.

Amen. We'll sing our final hymn. So now I'm going to try and you can give me half I wish I would have a nice show all