

Ecclesiastes: Everything is Vapour

Part 7 - “Worship That Honours God”

Text: Ecclesiastes 5:1-7

Delivered at Central Baptist Church on February 23, 2020 by Pastor Barton Priebe

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** We are doing a series through the book of Ecclesiastes. As we come to chapter 5 there is shift in what Solomon talks about.
 - So far, he has talked about many things we experience in our short lives: birth and death, work and hobbies, sadness and laughter, injustice and enjoying food.
 - Now Solomon wants to talk about living wisely in one specific area of life: worshipping God in the public gathering of his people. Notice in verse 1 he says to **“guard your steps when you go to the house of God.”**
- So, he is *not* talking to people who think God does not exist. He is *not* talking to people who think going to church on Sunday is a waste of time. He is *not* even speaking about the private worship of God’s people.
 - He is speaking to God’s people when they attend public worship.
 - The mere fact that you decided to come to this worship service today instead of sleeping in means that this passage applies directly to you.
- Solomon says there is a right way and a wrong way to worship God in public gatherings and he warns that we must be careful how we go about it. In fact, verse 6 says that wrong worship can anger God so that he may even **“destroy the work of your hands.”**
 - There is an urgency to our subject today. All through the Bible we see how God is displeased when his people worship wrongly.
- In Malachi 1:10 he says, **(SHOW SLIDE 2) “Oh that there were one among you who would shut the doors, that you might not kindle fire on my altar in vain!”** (Mal 1:10).
 - In Amos 5 God says to his people: **(SHOW SLIDE 3) “I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen.”**
 - Translation: Your public worship does not please me. I won’t accept your singing or your offerings. I wish someone would put the piano and guitars in storage and shut the doors of the church.
- Listen to Jesus describe the worship of people in his day: **(SHOW SLIDE 4) “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me”** (Mt 15:8-9).
 - In light of passages such as these I make no apology for saying that one of the most urgent needs of our day is to examine how we approach God when we gather for public worship.
 - To that end our passage today says three things: first, *beware of worshipping wrongly*. Second, *take steps to worship rightly*. And third, *always cultivate the attitude that creates true worship*.

BEWARE OF WORSHIPPING WRONGLY

- First then, **(SHOW SLIDE 5) beware of worshipping wrongly.**
 - Verse one sets the stage. Look at it with me. **READ 1 - Guard your steps when you go to the house of God.**

- Loving God means gathering regularly with his people in public worship. The Israelites attended worship every week at the temple or in a synagogue.
 - With the coming of Jesus, there is no longer one location on earth where God dwells for he now dwells in every believer. This does not mean we no longer need to gather for public worship for the book of Hebrews says it must be a defining habit of our lives (Heb 10:25). In fact, Paul says we must be even more careful in how we come approach God in public worship for every local church is a temple of the Holy Spirit.
 - So, ask yourself, **“Is it my habit to gather with the church for worship?”** As you come to public worship verse 1 says you are to “guard your steps.” This is an image of being careful with your conduct.¹ Your feet can lead you to wrong paths or your feet can lead you in the right way.
- To summarize, as we habitually gather for public worship we must beware of doing it wrongly and make sure we walk in the right paths.
 - What does that look like? Well, notice that this passage has two parts to it. Part 1 is verses 1-3 and part 2 is verses 4-7. Both parts have to do with being careful in how you approach God in corporate worship and both parts focus in on the *words* we say in corporate worship.
 - In this point let’s notice what we must beware of.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 6) First, beware of worship that offers many words but is not concerned with obedience.**
 - Look at second half of verse 1. **READ 1b-2b - *To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they are doing evil.* ²*Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God.***
 - The contrast is between listening, which we will see means listening in order to obey and offering the sacrifice of fools.
- So here we have an Israelite who faithfully attends public worship, faithfully offers their sacrifice there, and speaks many words of worship to God. But this passage says they don’t even realize that what they are doing is evil. Why is it evil?
 - Because they are not concerned to listen in order to obey. They say lots of words in prayer. They sing lots of words in the songs. They give when the offering comes. They think that going through these motions, doing these rituals, and saying these words pleases God.
 - But God is not pleased by lots of words or by acts of worship when our hearts are not interested in obedience.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 7) Second, beware of making promises to God that you do not keep.**
 - Look at verses 4-6. **READ 4-6 - ⁴*When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow.* ⁵*It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay.* ⁶*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?***
- If an Israelite was at a public worship service and they wanted express their devotion to God they could make a vow to give money or do something for God. But just like today a person might say, **“If God gets me out of this mess, I will do this or that”** but then they don’t follow through. The

¹ In poetic biblical texts, the feet are used as a figure for human conduct. One’s feet could lead one astray (Prov 1:15–16; 4:27; 5:5; 6:18; 19:2; Job 31:5; Ps 119:101; Isa 59:7) or lead one aright (Job 23:11; Pss 26:12; 119:59). People must be careful, therefore, to hold back their feet from the wrong way (Prov 1:15; Ps 119:101), turn their feet away from evil (Prov 4:27), and hold fast their feet in the right way (Job 23:11).

temple priest asks them about their vow and they say, **“Oh, I just got carried away. I shouldn’t have said that.”**

- Again, the fool thinks that his big promises to God are impressive displays of worship. But a lack of follow through is not pleasing to God and God will hold him accountable for his broken vow. Jesus also calls us to do what we say we are going to do. People should trust our words that our yes is yes and our no is no.
 - At worship, beware of telling God and others that you will commit to doing something unless you are actually going to do it.
- So, this passage warns us that those who offer many words in public worship without any intention to bring their whole lives before God are careless fools.

TAKE STEPS TO WORSHIP RIGHTLY

- **(SHOW SLIDE 8) Second, take steps to worship rightly.**
 - Now let’s look at the other side of the coin.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 9) First, come with a heart that wants to obey God.**
 - We are to gather in corporate worship with a receptive attitude and readiness to listen to God. Look at the second half of verse 1 again. **READ 1b - *To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools.***
 - This word “listen” means to listen for the purpose of obeying.
- So how can you do this week after week? Here are a few suggestions:
 - Prepare your heart before coming to church. If you can, spend some time praying and in the word.
 - Attend our monthly prayer meeting before the service.
 - If, like our family, you have a lot of kids and Sunday morning is busy then pray as a family on your drive in.
 - When the service begins just bow your heart before God and say, **“I am here to listen. Teach me and help me to follow you.”**
 - Engage your heart in every part of the service. Don’t just listen to the scripture being read but ponder it. Before the sermon, ask God to apply his word to your life that you might follow him.
 - Anytime you come to worship, be careful not to rush in. Pray. Ask God to give you the right heart. Prepare your heart.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 10) Second, when you say you will do something for God, go and do it.**
 - Look again at verse 4. **READ 4 - *When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow.***
 - When you say you will serve in a role, then serve. When you say you will be at something, be there. When you say you will give a certain amount of money, then give it.

ALWAYS CULTIVATE THE ATTITUDE THAT CREATES TRUE WORSHIP

- So, there you have it. Beware of worshipping wrongly and take steps to worship rightly. We’ve given some practical ways to do this. So now go and do it. But it’s not that easy. We need far more than tips and how to’s.
 - If you want to please God in how you worship then Solomon calls us to do one more thing, which is the key to everything we have talked about so far.
- In the final place, we must **(SHOW SLIDE 11) always cultivate the attitude that creates true worship.**

- Solomon has given very practical advice but notice that there is an attitude under everything he has said. When you have this attitude, it will ensure you worship rightly. What is that attitude? The Bible calls it “the fear of the Lord.” Look at how he ends the entire passage in the second half of verse 7. **READ 7 – . . . but God is the one you must fear.** And then look back at the first part in verse 2. **READ 2 - Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God.** Why? **“for God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few.”**
 - So, if you want to worship God in a way that pleases him then the key is to cultivate a heart attitude that always fears him – that stands in awe of he who is high and exalted in the heavens.
- But what does it mean to fear God? To fear obviously means to be afraid. But in what sense are we to be afraid? 1 John 4:8 says that **“perfect love drives out fear”** and goes on to say that he is referring to the fear of punishment. Additionally, Romans 8:1 says that **“there is . . . no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”** So clearly, for the Christian, the fear of God does not mean that you are always afraid that God is going to condemn you.
 - In fact, Psalm 130:4 says that when you experience God’s forgiveness it actually increases the fear of God. So, it can’t mean that you need to be terrified of God because no one experiences forgiveness and then screams in terror.
- So, what are we afraid of? Think of it like this: imagine you get to meet someone whom you greatly admire. You shake their hand but suddenly your palm is all sweaty and you are short on breath. What is happening there? You’re afraid. You aren’t afraid of being punished. You aren’t feeling a sense of terror. You’re afraid of acting wrongly or saying the wrong thing because you are so in awe of the person.
 - One of my favourite pastors is Matt Chandler. He’s a little taller than me and an incredible preacher. I met him once but when he shook my hand I suddenly got all nervous and blurted out, **“It’s so good to meet another tall pastor.”**
 - What I’m showing you is that there is a type of fear that is motivated by *joyful admiration*. There is a fear that is motivated by *gladness* and *awe*.
- The wise person is someone who has come to see that there is one great fact about this universe that should affect every single part of human existence. The one great fact is that God exists.
 - We live every moment of every day before the face of God. This great fact should produce awe and gladness in our Creator.
 - Furthermore, this great fact should affect how we live. We see all of this in Exodus 1. Pharaoh commanded the Egyptian midwives to kill every newborn who was a male. Exodus 1:17 says, **(SHOW SLIDE 12) “But the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live.”** These women’s lives were controlled by something far greater than Pharaoh. They believed in the existence of God and *not* displeasing God was far more important to them than displeasing the most powerful ruler in the world.
- So what is the fear of God? Old Testament scholar Walter Kaiser writes, **(SHOW SLIDE 13) “This ‘fear’ is not an attitude of terror or dread. It is instead a commitment of the total being to trust and believe the living God. . . The one who fears God dreads nothing more than God’s disfavor. Such a worshiper wants nothing more than to know the living God intimately and submit to His will.”**²

² Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Coping with Change – Ecclesiastes*, (Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications), Kindle Edition, Location 1341.

- So, you see, at the end of the day it is not tips or how to's that will enable you to worship rightly. It is cultivating a deep awe of who God is. It is being filled with a joyful admiration of him. This will cause you to worship rightly.
- In Kenneth Grahame's classic book, *The Wind in the Willows*, the animals named Mole and Rat are drawn to an island where they think they might encounter the god of their world.
 - Rat says, ***“Here, in this holy place, here if anywhere, surely we shall find Him!” Then suddenly the Mole felt a great Awe fall upon him, an awe that turned his muscles to water, bowed his head, and rooted his feet to the ground. It was no panic terror—indeed he felt wonderfully at peace and happy—but it was an awe that smote and held him and, without seeing, he knew it could only mean that some august Presence was very, very near. . .***
 - And then he catches a glimpse of the god. He is awestruck. ***“Rat!” he found breath to whisper, shaking. “Are you afraid?” “Afraid?” murmured the Rat, his eyes shining with unutterable love. “Afraid! Of Him? O, never, never! And yet—and yet—O, Mole, I am afraid!” Then the two animals, crouching to the earth, bowed their heads and did worship.”***
- Now if that is how an author can write about two animals before a pretend god, imagine what it would be like to stand before God himself? And yet, realize this great fact. You do stand before him right now. You are in his presence right now.
 - Do we realize what we are doing when we come to worship? We are not simply attending a service. We are not merely “going to church.” We are daring to draw near to the Creator of heaven and earth. We are lifting our voices in song to the who spoke and a universe leapt into existence. We are praying to the Holy One, whom Isaiah saw and cried out, “I am undone,” whom John saw and said, “I fell at his feet as though dead.”
 - Cultivate a joyful admiration for God. Cultivate a sense of awe. As you do this you will instinctively come to listen and not offer the sacrifice of fools. When you see him for who he is you will bow and say, ***“All I am is yours. All I have is yours. Command me however you will.”***
- How do you cultivate this attitude?
 - Answer: follow Solomon but then go beyond Solomon. You can cultivate the fear of God by following Solomon in remembering that you are a mere creature on the earth and God is high and exalted in heaven. That produces awe.
- But then go beyond Solomon for our sense of awe and joy, reverence and gladness should go way beyond his.
 - Solomon was awestruck by the great chasm between heaven and earth, between God and human beings. But we stand in greater awe for in Jesus, this exalted God has crossed the chasm and come down to earth.
 - Solomon rejoiced in the sacrificial animals at the temple that covered his sins. We know a far greater joy for Jesus, the lamb of God, was slain so that our sins might not merely be covered but forgiven forever.
 - Solomon could only draw so near to God in worship for no one was permitted to pass through the curtain that blocked the way to the presence of God in the holy of holies in the temple. But we can now come boldly into the very throne room of God for, through his death, Jesus has torn the curtain in two.
 - Solomon could address God in prayer as Almighty, as Lord of heaven and earth. But through Jesus the Almighty God has also become our loving Father. Through Jesus we

may approach God without any sense of terror, without any fear of condemnation, and always be assured of his love for us.

- This is why Jesus teaches us to begin our prayers to God, not with **“Almighty God”** or **“Exalted God”** but **“Our Father in heaven.”** Jesus says you should begin every prayer that way for it will properly cultivate the fear of God in your heart. When you say, **“Father”** you remember God’s great love for you in adopting you into his family. You can draw near. When you say, **“in heaven”** you are remembering that your Father is **“the one in the heavens,”** the exalted one, the powerful one.
 - So, you see, every time you pray those words you cultivate your sense of joy in the Father’s love for you *and* awe in the great power of your Father who is not a mere creature on earth but is the “one in the heavens.”
- The book of Hebrews says the same thing. On the one side it calls you to draw near with full confidence of his acceptance of you. Hebrews 4:14, 16, says, **(SHOW SLIDE 14) “Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God . . . Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”**
 - And Hebrews 12:28-29 calls you to come with awe and respect: **(SHOW SLIDE 15) “let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.”**
- When my daughter, Jessica, was seven years old we were lying on the couch together after saying our evening prayers. She looked at me and said, **“How come we can’t see Jesus?”** I said, **“Yes, he is invisible now but a day is coming when we will see him. Won’t that be amazing?”**
 - She then grew very serious and yet very joyful. She said, **“When that happens I am going to bow before him. Even if I am outside on gravel I am still going to bow before him like this.”** And then she got off the couch, kneeled on the floor and pressed her forehead to the ground.
 - Do you see it? This is the fear of God. The fear of God is that sense of total awe and reverence mingled with joy and delight. To fear God means to be so captivated by who he is that it effects every single part of your life. Cultivate this and you will worship rightly.
- Listen a day is coming when the great fact of God’s existence will be made plain to everyone. On that day, all will fear God – some with awe and joy and some with terror. Are you prepared for that? People always say they want God to show himself. But do they realize what it is they are truly asking? That day will be marked by fear of all kinds. As C.S. Lewis writes,
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 16) “When that happens, it is the end of the world. When the author walks on to the stage the play is over. God is going to invade, all right: but what is the good of saying you are on His side then, when you see the whole natural universe melting away like a dream and something else—something it never entered your head to conceive—comes crashing in; something so beautiful to some of us and so terrible to others that none of us will have any choice left? (SHOW SLIDE 17) For this time it will be God without disguise; something so overwhelming that it will strike either irresistible love or irresistible horror into every creature. It will be too late then to choose your side. . . . That will not be the time for choosing: it will be the time when we discover which side we really have chosen, whether we realized it before or not. Now, today, this moment, is our chance to choose the right side.”**³
 - Let us approach our public worship in the fear of the Lord. We come to listen, to bow the knee, and to give him all that we are.

³ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (HarperCollins Publishers), 66.