

Topic	Worshiping in God's House
Reference	Ecclesiastes 5: 1-7
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Just as we can have a 2000-word essay that hasn't got much content, we can also have 2000-member church that is empty of spiritual substance. We can have all the trappings of a church; the worship, the prayers, the sermons, the fellowship, ministries and so on, but it is still not much of a church. A church is only a church when God is at its center, where His agenda drives its activities. In many churches God is not at the center but at the side. Often, God is nearly an excuse for running church and man has become at the center.

When I was in school I remember of a Bahasa Malaysia test and it was a question which required me to make sentences using some words. The trouble is that I didn't know the meaning of one word. I was stuck but didn't stop me from trying and I did make a sentence but my teacher gave me zero marks and said that you didn't prove that you knew the meaning of the word. In other words, you missed the point of the question. Today, if God were to do a hypothetical audit of the churches we have all over the world, it is my believe that He will give very low marks if not zero marks to many churches. Out of the seven churches in Revelation only two were commended, the other five were justiced. We need to be very careful individually and collectively about how we do church, less we miss the point entirely. We must be careful not to let our church become like the 2000-word essay, plenty of words but devoid of real content and so is with this thought that we want to approach our text and we start to unpack the verses.

Now when we examine the 12 chapters of Ecclesiastes as a whole, the one theme that stands out notably is that when the teacher when he surveys all that happen under the sun, he finds them to be utterly meaningless or as he puts it a chasing after the wind. In painting the activities of life as meaningless and he does it with much pessimism and Sinicism. It is the teacher's way of forcing the readers to arrive at this conclusion, which is life is pretty meaningless without God, that life will only make sense if God is at the center. If you take God out of the picture you will find life pretty meaningless.

In Ecclesiastes 5 and we find that the teacher suddenly talks about going to God's house to worship. Verse 1 says

Guard your steps when you go to the house of God.

Many people find Ecclesiastes 5 to be somehow out of sync with the rest of the book. It sounds as if the writer has changed topic, but the truth of the matter is that our text today is very much a part of the overall flow of Ecclesiastes. If you were to read these verses along the theme of the book; what the teacher is trying to say is that this business of going to the house of God can be

also rather meaningless. The term ‘house of God’ in verse 1 is anonymous with the temple or in today’s term it refers to the church. So as the teacher sees the multitudes heading towards the temple as he considers what happen at the temple he finds the whole spectacle rather meaningless. A modern version of this would be someone sitting in their yard near the church and every Sunday morning they watches us driving into the church compound and he wonders why are all these people going to church? In fact, I want to ask you the same question, why did you come to church? Why do you wake up every Sunday morning and drive all the way here? What do you hope to find? People come to church for all sorts of reasons. Some come to seek God, some come because they have struggles in life and they come to find some comforts, some may be feeling a sense of emptiness in their life and they come looking for some answers, others may be coming merely out of habit. There may be some who come in order to be seen. Is your purpose of coming to church meaningful?

So from this point of view what the teacher is trying to do in the text is to impart the real meaning of going to the house of God. So in studying this portion of Ecclesiastes we want to shape or rather re-shape our attitude towards going to church and this is the underlying purpose of today’s sermon. The structure of our text is rather straightforward. The seven verses can be divided into three distinct part.

PART I: The teacher issues the general instruction about going to the house of God. As I discussed at the start we want to discuss how to make the conditions right for worshipping God in his house and this verse part includes the last line in verse 7 which is the anchor of the text. It says,

Therefore fear God.

Just oppose between these two ends of the text the teacher then gives two specific instructions. In Part 2 he talks about how we should talk in the house of the God. The first part is about guarding our steps, the second part is about guarding our speech. In the last part, the teacher touches on the issue of making vows, how we ought to take seriously the promises we make before God. When we examine the text as a whole we notice the teacher’s frequent use of vocabulary related to verbal communication,

So in other words he is very concerned about how we speak in the house of God and we find all these rather unrelated to the main topic of worshipping in God’s house, but let me assure you that they are very much related.

- Part I talks about the sanctuary about going to the house of God. The key word here is reverence.
- Part II talks about with our speech, what we ought to say or not to say. The key word here is restrain.
- Part III focuses on making vows and keeping our promises. The key word here is responsibility.

PART I

The teacher begins part I by saying

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.

This is not to say watch your steps when you go down the stairs in a church, unless you fall down and injure yourself. This has more to do with preparing our hearts when we come into God's sanctuary. It is about our attitude when we walk into this auditorium or put it this way, guarding your spiritual steps when you go to the house of God. As the teacher starts writing these verses I imagine him recalling the incident recorded in the Exodus where Moses had a direct encounter with God. God appeared to him in the form of a burning bush and Moses tried to go nearer to inspect this strange sight, but before he could get any closer God said to him

Exodus 3:5 "Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground."

Why the need for Moses to remove his sandals?

After a lot of walking our shoes become dirty and dusty. The sandals which Moses wore therefore represented his sins, so as he stepped into the presence of a Holy God, taking off his footwear was to show that he was a sinful person and nothing unclean can come near Holy God. More importantly, it was to symbolize his reverence and awe before a God of holiness. So as far as the teacher is concerned the temple is also holy ground because the presence of God dwells inside the temple building in the place called Holy of Holies. So as he writes the verses in our text I imagine the teacher weighing this issue of reverence for God or the lack of.

Now do you believe that God is present in our midst now. So, do you agree that this is also holy ground. I wanted to use Exodus 3:5 as a backdrop to our text. I brought up the account of the burning bush to illustrate on how when we come to church we come like Moses as sinners before a God of holiness and righteousness who cannot stand even the slightest stain of sin in his people, that is why the teacher instructs us to guard our steps when we go to the house of God. In other words, to be careful when you go and worship God. It is a very serious matter. We all have to come before the Almighty God in fear and trembling. Now to impress upon you how serious this is, only the high priest could enter the holy of holies to commune with God on behalf of all Israelites and he did it once a year on the day of atonement. The holy of holies is a small little space which is really an oxymoron small space but the presence of the almighty God is there. It is behind a thick curtain in which He has placed the Ark of the Covenant, but before the high priest can enter the holy of holies and come into the presence of the Almighty God he must go through a series of purification rituals as detailed in Leviticus 16. By reading this you cannot help but get the sense that coming to God's presence is very serious matter that mustn't be taken lightly.

Before the high priest entered the holy of holies the other priests would tie a rope around his ankle, because if the high priest had been negligent in his preparation and if he had been struck dead by the glory of God's divine presence, the other priest could pull out his dead body. It helps us to illustrate how we need to take God very seriously and because it is such a serious matter we guard our steps; we must prepare ourselves solemnly when we come to worship a holy God in his house. Now some of you may think that the question of sin has been settled by Jesus on the cross and you are right and that is why nobody is struck dead during the worship service but Ananias and Sapphira were struck dead in Acts chapter 5. God must be taken very seriously.

The text today speaks louder to us than to the Israelites in those days. It is more relevant to us than to them surprisingly. Why so? Well to begin with we often remark that the church is not the building, church is really the community of God's people and the building is just a physical structure. Now this is something that we all agree on, it is theologically sound, supported by verses in the New Testament. For example, if we recall the encounter Jesus had with the Samaritan woman in John chapter 4 when they were discussing whether God should be worshiped on Mount Gerizim where the Samaritans worship or in the Jerusalem where the Jews worship. Jesus reply that the place no longer be important neither on this mountain or in Jerusalem.

John 4:21 & 23 *“Woman,” Jesus replied, “believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth...”*

So in his answer Jesus was prophesizing the day when the spirit of God would descend and dwell in the hearts of all believers that is the day of Pentecost, about a week after Jesus ascension to heaven. That event is recorded in Acts chapter 2. It was a pivotal point in bible history because it was the day when the church was born. What it means that for most of Old Testament history God choose to manifest His presence among his people in one specific place in the holy of holies. That went on for almost 1500 years from the time of Moses until Jesus except for a brief period of time when Solomon's temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC, but from the day of Pentecost until now, the so called New Testament era, God's presence have been residing within all believers and that is why he allowed the second temple to be destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD. On that basis Paul wrote

1 Corinthians 6:19 *...do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God?*

There is an another aspect to this. Jesus also said

Matthew 18:20 *For where two or three are gathered in My name, there am I among them.*

Meaning where two or three believers meet together in his name there you find God in their midst and all this is pretty mind boggling if you think about it, God is present within us and

among us. God's manifested presence is not just in the church but unfortunately there is a drawback to this. Somehow in subconscious level because God is always within us and also among us we tend to lose our reverence for Him. Maybe this is the case of familiarity breathing contempt which means that close and constant association with something often leads to a loss of appreciation for its true value. When you have too much of something you tend to take it for granted. In this respect, if we survey the Bible from cover to cover we find that the phrase 'Fear of God' or 'Fear of the Lord' or some other similar terms they occur at a far higher frequency in the Old Testament than in the New Testament. When we scan through the pages of the Old Testament we detect among the Israelites, the greater level of reverence for God. Of course there were times when the Israelites rebelled and sinned against God, but generally in the Old Testament times there was this fear of God. Now to fear God doesn't mean to be terrified of Him but to revere Him, but in contrast people today have a lesser view of God and more diminished opinion of Him. Even Christians in general do not show such a high degree of reverence for God especially over the past 100 to 200 years. Man has become bigger God has become smaller. Again man has occupied the center, God has been pushed to the side.

If you google the term 'Fear of God', a line of designer clothing will come in. We will be shocked to see the extent to which God's name is being trivialized, use as a brand, but are we really any much better. For example, how often we use words like 'Oh My God, 'Oh my Gosh'. Gosh means God. When you say Oh my goodness, Goodness refers to God because only God is good and we use these terms loosely in our conversation without thinking, without realizing that we are showing a lack of reverence for God. I hope none of you use the word Jesus or Jeas as an exclamation.

DRESSING:

I have always talked to my wife and the kids, come Sunday morning when we go for worship service we go in our Sunday best. Don't overdress because we are not going for a party or social function, something decent, something nice, something formal because we are going to have audience with the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. That means no slippers, no short pants, no T shirts. What I am saying is that, imagine if tomorrow you have an audience with a prime minister I bet you would be neatly, smartly and formally dressed. The point is this, let your dressing when you come to church reflect your reverence for God. The key word in Part 1 as I told just now is reverence and sadly this reverence is missing in many churches and that is why I said this text speaks louder to us than those in Solomon's time. The teacher further says in verse 1

Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong.

Come closer so that you can hear better so that you can take in better what is being preached. In a way to show that are serious about coming to church and indirectly showing your reverence. So the teacher is comparing going near to listen with offering the sacrifice of fools, fools who sin

unknowingly. What kind of comparison is that and this needs a little explanation. The NLT translates it as

It is evil to make mindless offerings to God.

What happens is that when an Israelite goes to the temple he brings along an animal for sacrifice. The animal is placed on the altar which is in the courtyard outside the temple building. The worshipper then places his hand on the head of the animal to symbolically transfer his sins to the creature which is then slaughtered and burned. This sacrificial system was instituted by God to remind his people about the seriousness of sin. God was telling his people, look you are coming to me with your sin and because of your sin this innocent animal has to die. It is paying the price for your sin, dying on your behalf. If you were there offering the animal for sacrifice, seeing it slaughtered before your very eyes you would likely take God's laws more seriously, perhaps even vowing to repent and not to sin anymore. This sacrificial system that God set in place in the temple also serve as a pointer to the sacrificial death of Jesus.

Many of the Israelites were doing this mindlessly. Meaning, they were doing it mechanically, carelessly or not seriously. There was no repentance that's why the teacher finds the whole thing rather meaningless and hence when the teacher says, better to go near to listen rather than to offer sacrifice of fools he is instructing us not to do things mechanically or mindlessly when we come to church. So merely don't come to church out of habit, come because you want to worship a Holy God in reverence and awe. To do it mechanically means to be disrespectful to God.

PART II

It is about guarding our mouth. This may not seem to be related to main thrust of the text, namely reverence for God, but you will soon see it is clearly part of the overall flow. Not only should the conditions in our heart be right for worship, the house of God should be also conducive for worship. Now if there is one thing that can upset the atmosphere in the house of God, making it unconducive for worship, it is the tongue. An uncontrolled tongue, a loose tongue and the teacher understands this. The Bible warns us against the dangers of the tongue.

James 3:5-6 Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

Psalm 64:23 They sharpen their tongues like swords and aim cruel words like deadly arrows.

That's why it is easy to understand why the teacher instructs us in verse 2

Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God.

It is to lose control of our tongue. Be careful of what or how you speak in church. The keyword here is **restrain**. People because of this tongue can destroy the unity of the church and ruin the spirit of community among the people of God and we have seen this many times. The result is tension is amenity, making it hard to worship God is reverence. Having fellowship with each other is a beautiful expression of our membership in God's family, but I am concerned about what you talk about. Please don't talk about other people. The wife of president Roosevelt said *Great minds discuss ideas. Average minds discuss events. Small minds discuss people.* Eleanor Roosevelt.

If you have nothing good to say about somebody, don't say anything. Often even a seemingly neutral comment can cause problems and remember this important advice. What we say is easily misunderstood, misconstrued or even distorted, especially when it gets transmitted from one to other one to other one until it reaches the ear of the person and he gets all angry, because the message has been distorted. The Bible often tells us to be careful with our words.

Psalm 141:3 *Set a guard over my mouth, Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips.*

Scripture also advises us instead to use our words as a tool for betterment of the community of God's people. Paul writes

Colossians 4:6 *Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt,...*

Ephesians 4:29 *Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.*

At the end of verse 2 and also verse 3, the teacher further instructs us to let your words be few. Just now it was about the quality of your speech, now it is about the volume, meaning cutting down on the amount of words coming out from your mouth. Although, it is not talking about volume as in loudness, it is also good to cut that down as well. In verse 3 the teacher says the same thing but in a different way

A dream comes when there are many cares, and many words mark the speech of a fool.

In NLT it is written

Too much activity gives you restless dreams; too many words make you a fool.

Indeed, there are many people who like to monopolize the conversation. You say one word; they reply with 1000 words. According to the teacher, if you talk too much you come across as a fool. Do you notice that smart people speak less, those who are not so clever they talk a lot in a way to hide their stupidity, because there is a proverb that empty vessels make the most noise. There is another saying

Wise men talk because they have something to say; fools, because they have to say something.

Also I found that insecure people they always a lot to say. Confidence is silent. Insecurities are loud. So if you talk a lot it shows your insecurity. The Bible teaches us to speak less.

James 1:19 *My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak...*

When we are in the house of God the teacher gives the reason for reduced speech. In the middle of verse 2

God is in heaven and you are on earth.

PART III

Making vows before God and keeping them. The teacher says in

4 When you make a vow to God, do not delay to fulfill it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow.

God dislikes people who come to him making all sorts of promises but not keeping them. When you got married you said your marriage vows before God. When you got baptized and you answered yes, yes to the pastor's questions you made your vows before God. In your private prayers when you tell God that you will do this or that those are also vows. How does this part fit into the overall flow of the text. Well it means that if you break your promises with God it means that you are treating Him lightly, showing disrespect, lacking reverence for him. That's why the teacher cautions us in verse 5

5 It is better not to make a vow than to make one and not fulfill it.

If you cannot keep your word, do not give it. Not only is it bad to make a promise to God and not keeping it, the teacher also speaks against making a promise and then withdraw it later.

6 Do not let your mouth lead you into sin. And do not protest to the temple messenger, "My vow was a mistake."

There are serious consequences to breaking your vows to God or even taking them back, which is in the last line of verse 6.

Why should God be angry at what you say and destroy the work of your hands?

It sounds as like God will not be angry and will not wipe out what you have achieved, actually the opposite is intended, God will be angry at what you say and He will destroy the work of your hands if you have been careless with your vows to him.

Say what you mean and mean what you say and the keyword is responsibility, being responsible for the things you said you would do and don't break a promise. In the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:37 **Let your yes be yes and your no be no.**

In conclusion, earlier I remarked that a church is not a church unless God is at its center. When God is at its center, He is there as a holy and righteous God and He alone is to be worshipped in reverence and awe and that should be our attitude when we come into His house to worship Him and as we do that we guard our steps and also guard our mouth.