

Living a Meaningful Life

Worshiping God

Ecclesiastes 5:1-7

Rev. Freddy Fritz

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Worshipping God

Scripture

In his quest to find out how to live a meaningful life the writer of Ecclesiastes addresses the issue of worshipping God.

Let us read Ecclesiastes 5:1-7:

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. 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. ³ For a dream comes with much business, and a fool's voice with many words.

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? ⁷ For when dreams increase and words grow many, there is vanity; but God is the one you must fear. (Ecclesiastes 5:1-7)

Introduction

The film clip titled *James 3* portrays a family of four getting ready for church on a Sunday morning. Even though the viewer cannot hear what the family members are saying, it is not hard to read their lips, or at least their attitudes. They wake up grumpy and still sleepy. Dad stumbles over the laundry and kicks it out of the way. Older daughter argues with mom about she will (or will *not*) wear to church. Younger daughter spills her milk and cereal. Angry words are exchanged, especially when dad slams on the brakes while mom is trying to put on lipstick in the car.

As they get ready for church, no one in the family smiles or

exchanges even one friendly word. . . until they walk into church and it is time to put on a happy face. Mom and dad smile at the first people they meet. They take their places in the sanctuary with smiles on their faces. When they stand to sing the opening song, their eyes are closed in reverent adoration. As the film clip ends, the sound begins, and we can hear what they are singing: “Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow.”¹

Now, I know that this does not happen to you or your family, right? It only happens to other people and other families—and in other churches! Or does it?

When you go to worship God on Sunday mornings, what happens at your home before you get to church? What attitudes do you bring to worship? What is on your mind during the worship service? How attentively are you engaging in worshipping God?

More than two millennia ago the Preacher (who wrote the book of Ecclesiastes) noticed a similar problem with the people of his day. People went to worship God, but they failed to approach God with reverence. Worshipping God had become a mere formality.

In fact, we know from the prophet Malachi (who wrote his book only a century or so before the Preacher wrote Ecclesiastes) that the people dishonored God in their worship of him. God required that the people bring the best, unblemished animals to be sacrificed in worship to him. Instead, the people brought God what they could not use themselves. They brought the sick, lame, and blind animals to God. And the result was that instead of blessing his worshipers, God said, “Cursed be the cheat who has a male in his flock, and vows it, and yet sacrifices to the Lord what is blemished” (Malachi 1:14a).

Lesson

Against this background of God cursing his worshipers, we

¹ Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2010), 119.

hear the Preacher's urgent message in today's text. He gives his people four commands about worshiping God properly. These four commands given two millennia ago are still applicable to us today.

In today's lesson we learn that we must worship God in his house with reverence!

I. Pay Attention to God's Word (5:1)

First, pay attention to God's word.

The Preacher said in Ecclesiastes 5:1a: **“Guard your steps when you go to the house of God.”**

Be careful when you go to worship God. Think about what you are about to do. You are not going to meet a bunch of friends at a local restaurant. You are not dropping in for a friendly visit to a family member. You are going to **“the house of God.”** You are going to the place where the Almighty, Sovereign Creator, and Savior of your soul stoops down to meet with you. So, **“guard your steps”!**

I love the way Dr. R. C. Sproul helps worshipers do this. He wants worshipers to pay attention to what they are about to do. So, on the front cover of the worship bulletin at Saint Andrew's Chapel in Sanford, FL, worshipers read these words: *We cross the threshold of the secular to the sacred, from the common to the uncommon, from the profane to the holy. . . .* Dr. Sproul wants worshipers to recognize that they are about to enter into a sacred time and space where God has called his people to meet with him.

I admit that it is difficult to pay attention as easily when we have a multipurpose room that sometimes serves as a sanctuary and at other times as a dining room or even a play room. Nevertheless, until we build our new sanctuary (hopefully in the not-too-distant future!), **guard your steps when you go to the house of God.** Pay attention to what you are about to do.

But *how* should you guard your steps? The Preacher explains how to do it in the next line. He says, **“To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools”** (5:1b). One commenta-

tor says that “in the temple, while sacrifices were offered to God, silence reigned, fostering a sense of divine presence and human receptivity. Then the priest would read from God’s law and explain what was read. He would offer prayers, and the people would respond with songs. And finally the priest would place God’s blessing on his people.”² In other words, the Preacher is commanding you to pay attention to God’s word. He says, **“To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools.”**

“Fools” here refers to those who bring unacceptable sacrifices to God. People are **fools** when they bring to God what they cannot use themselves: sick, lame, and blind animals. People are **fools** when they bring to God what is unacceptable to him. People are **fools** when they worship God in the way they think is best rather than in the way God has prescribed.

And sadly, the Preacher said that the people who do not pay attention to how they worship God **“do not know that they are doing evil”** (5:1c). They are oblivious to the fact that their worship is offensive to God.

So, in order to worship God in his house with reverence, the first thing to do is pay attention to God’s word. Listen to what God has to say to you. Enter into God’s house in order to listen to God.

So, pay attention to God’s word.

II. Watch What You Say (5:2-3)

Second, watch what you say.

The Preacher said in Ecclesiastes 5:2a: **“Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God.”**

The phrase **“before God”** usually means “in the Temple, in God’s presence.”³ So, watch what you say when you come to God

² Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010), 131.

³ Michael V. Fox, *Ecclesiastes: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), 33.

in his house.

Why does the Preacher tell you to watch what you say to God? He answers, **“For God is in heaven and you are on earth”** (5:2b). The Preacher wants you to remember the vast distance between God and you. **God is in heaven and you are on earth.**

Let’s suppose that you were invited to meet the President in the Oval Office. At the appointed time you were ushered into his office. A few moments later the President stepped into the room. Would it be appropriate for you to begin speaking and keep on speaking without letting the President getting a word in edgewise? No, of course not.

How much more, then, should you remember that **God is in heaven and you are on earth.** **“Therefore,”** as the Preacher said, **“let your words be few”** (5:2c).

The Preacher supported his point that you should watch what you say to God with a proverb in verse 3: **“For a dream comes with much business, and a fool’s voice with many words.”** Now, what does this unfamiliar proverb mean? The Preacher seems to be saying that when someone is caught up in a lot of business, there is likelihood of dreaming at night. Similarly, when someone uses a lot of words, there is a likelihood of saying something foolish. So, I could summarize what the Preacher is saying as follows: “Just as much work leads to dreams, so many words leads to foolishness.”

Now, the actual number of words used is not the issue. The real issue is whether the words used are true and sincere. One commentator said, “The fewness of the words is not the main concern; but whether they be the words of the heart.”⁴

Sincerity is extremely important when you come to worship God in his house. For example, when you sing a psalm, hymn, or spiritual song to God, you should pay attention to the words that you are singing. You should focus your thoughts on God with love in your heart for him.

⁴ Charles Bridges, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes* (1860; repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1961), 102.

The Boardwalk Chapel in Wildwood, NJ has a sign to help worshipers remember this. The sign reads, “Sing it like you mean it.” But the word “like” is crossed out and replaced with the word “because.” So, the sign actually says, “Sing it *because* you mean it.”⁵ Watch what you sing in God’s house.

And this of course also applies to the way you pray too. Your prayer should be sincere. Whether it is the prayer of confession or the Lord’s Prayer or the Prayer of the Church, your prayer should be sincere.

In order to help you watch what you say, ask yourself the following questions:

- Am I speaking from the heart?
- Am I saying the words because I mean them?
- Am I using words to flatter or impress others?
- Do I really believe what I am saying?

So, first, pay attention to God’s word. Second, watch what you say.

III. Keep Your Vow (5:4-6)

Third, keep your vow.

The Preacher said in Ecclesiastes 5:4-6: **“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 that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry at your voice and destroy the work of your hands?”**

The Preacher is alluding to the law of God in Deuteronomy 23:21-22, which states, “If you make a vow to the Lord your God, you shall not delay fulfilling it, for the Lord your God will surely require it of you, and you will be guilty of sin. But if you refrain from vowing, you will not be guilty of sin.”

⁵ Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2010), 124.

Now, I would like to take some time on this command because I believe it is one that we too easily gloss over.

A vow is simply “a solemn promise made to God either to do or to abstain from some action.”⁶

In Biblical times people made vows to God, often in the context of public worship (see Leviticus 22:18-20). We find vows made in the Psalms. For example, Psalm 50:14 says, “Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and perform your vows to the Most High.” Psalm 65:1 says, “Praise is due to you, O God, in Zion, and to you shall vows be performed.” Hannah vowed to dedicate her firstborn son to become a priest (1 Samuel 1:11). And Jephthah made a rash vow that cost him his daughter (Judges 11:29-40).

The Preacher is not talking about a rash or a sinful vow. Instead he is talking about vows that God’s people make to him, like the vow the Psalmist described in Psalm 76:11a, “Make your vows to the Lord your God and perform them.” The Preacher simply wants God’s people to keep the vows that they make to God.

Now, notice a few points about vows. *First, you are not required to make a vow.* Verse 4a says, “**When you vow. . .**” A vow is a voluntary act on your part.

Second, all vows are made to God. Verse 4b says, “**When you vow a vow to God. . .**” A vow is made directly to God, usually in the presence of human witnesses. An oath, on the other hand, is made directly to humans, invoking God as a witness, and is “a sacred promise to keep one’s word and to honor one’s covenants and agreements.”⁷

Third, vows must be kept once they are made. Verse 4c says, “**When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow.**” I will never forget talking to Dr. John Gerstner in my study one Sunday morning, just before he was to preach to our congregation. Dr. Gerstner, for those

⁶ David Noel Freedman, Allen C. Myers and Astrid B. Beck, *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Co., 2000), 1361.

⁷ David Noel Freedman, Allen C. Myers and Astrid B. Beck, *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), 978.

of you who don't know him, was a towering theologian in our country. Dr. Sproul said that Dr. Gerstner was one of the two greatest teachers that he ever had the privilege to know. Furthermore, Dr. Gerstner, perhaps because he was such a towering theologian, was extremely intimidating. So, as we were sitting in my study I was trying to think of something suitable to say. Then I remembered that when Dr. Gerstner taught at my seminary, he said that he would give every student a free two-volume set of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*. There was only one condition to receive the free two-volume set: the student had to vow to God that he would read the entire 1660 pages in a tiny 8-point font in one year. Frankly, that is about as much reading as reading through the entire Old Testament twice and the New Testament once. Well, I had a friend named Danny Phillips who had a lazy eye, which made reading extremely tiring for him. But, he accepted Dr. Gerstner's offer. About a year and half later I saw Danny and asked him how his reading had gone. "Freddy," he said, "I managed to finish reading all of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* in one year. But it was extremely difficult because of my lazy eye." So, when Dr. Gerstner was sitting in my study I proudly told him of my friend Danny's accomplishment, thinking that Dr. Gerstner would say something like, "Wow! That is fantastic! I am really proud of him for working so hard at it." But instead, all Dr. Gerstner said was, "Well, he made vow, didn't he!" Clearly, Dr. Gerstner understood that vows must be kept once they are made.

Fourth, don't make a vow you don't intend to keep. Verse 5 says, "**It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay.**" We all know about promises that politicians make and then do not keep them. Don't make a vow that you don't intend to keep.

Fifth, make your vow thoughtfully. Verse 6a says, "**Let not your mouth lead you into sin.**" Think before you speak.

Sixth, your vow is not cancelled because you made a mistake. Verse 6b says, ". . . **and do not say before the messenger that it [i.e., the vow] was a mistake.**" One commentator said that the

Preacher “seems to be referring to people making vows to pay a certain sum of money to the temple treasury. When they failed to pay what they had promised, a priest or some other messenger from the temple would visit them to remind them of their vow. Then people might respond that their vow was a ‘mistake.’”⁸ But simply saying that the vow was a mistake does not cancel the vow.

And seventh, God will punish you for not keeping your vow. Verse 6c says, **“Why should God be angry at your voice and destroy the work of your hands?”** God punishes people who come up with lame excuses for not keeping vows.

Now, perhaps you are thinking that you have not made any vows to God. Let me remind you of some vows that you have made to God. If you are parent, you made baptismal vows when your child was baptized. If you are an officer, you made vows as an officer. And, if you are a communicant member of our church, which is most of you here today, you assented to the following declarations and promises:

1. Do you acknowledge yourselves to be sinners in the sight of God, justly deserving his displeasure, and without hope save in his sovereign mercy?
2. Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and Savior of sinners, and do you receive and rest upon him alone for salvation as he is offered in the Gospel?
3. Do you now resolve and promise, in humble reliance upon the grace of the Holy Spirit, that you will endeavor to live as becomes the followers of Christ?
4. Do you promise to support the Church in its worship and work to the best of your ability?
5. Do you submit yourselves to the government and discipline of the Church, and promise to study its purity and peace?

Let me ask you about number 4. You promised to support the Church in its worship and work to the best of your ability. That

⁸ Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010), 135.

means that you are worshipping God in his house every Sunday—unless you are providentially hindered. And it also means that you are actively working in the church. This does not include attending a Bible study or Growth Group; rather, it means that you are serving in some ministry in the church. By my count, more than 1 in 4 communicant members are not actively involved in some ministry. I am not including members who are homebound or who have moved away. That means that 1 in 4 of you are not keeping your vow.

So, how do you keep your vow? First, be aware of the vows that you have made to God. Second, do what you have vowed. And third, if you are not sure about what you may or may not have vowed, talk to one of the elders.

So, first, pay attention to God's word. Second, watch what you say. Third, keep your vow.

IV. Revere God in Worship (5:7)

And fourth, revere God in worship.

The Preacher said in Ecclesiastes 5:7: **“For when dreams increase and words grow many, there is vanity; but God is the one you must fear.”**

The first part of the verse seems to suggest that careless words in worship are meaningless and vanity.

However, the Preacher insists that **God is the one you must fear**. He means that God is the one you must revere. You come to God's house to pay him honor and reverence and respect.

Conclusion

So, you must worship God in his house with reverence! How do you do that? First, pay attention to God's word. Second, watch what you say. Third, keep your vow. And fourth, revere God in worship. When you do that, you will discover that you are indeed worshipping God in spirit and in truth. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church (PCA)

Answers for Life!

Address: 19911 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., Tampa, FL 33647

Telephone: (813) 973-2484

Fax: (813) 973-4673

Email: Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org

Web site: www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org

PRAYER:

Our Father, thank you for the book of Ecclesiastes. Thank you for the teaching of the Preacher.

We want to worship you in your house with reverence. Help us to pay attention to your Word, watch what we say, keep all our vows, and revere you in our worship.

And all of this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHARGE:

As you leave here today, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.