

When Worship is Evil Edition 2

Eccl. 5:1-7

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Note: The text below was prepared for oral delivery rather than for publication in print. As such, be aware that sentence fragments are intentionally used and that this document has not been edited to correct the errors in grammar, sentence structure, etc.

I. Scripture Reading (Eccl. 5:1-7):

Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God, and be more ready to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools: for they consider not that they do evil. ²Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few. ³For a dream cometh through the multitude of business; and a fool's voice is known by multitude of words. ⁴When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it; for he hath no pleasure in fools: pay that which thou hast vowed. ⁵Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay. ⁶Suffer not thy mouth to cause thy flesh to sin; neither say thou before the angel, that it was an error: wherefore should God be angry at thy voice, and destroy the work of thine hands? ⁷For in the multitude of dreams and many words there are also divers vanities: but fear thou God.

II. Introduction:

- A. The title of today's message is "When Worship is Evil." Contrary to some of the popular thinking of many, the Bible clearly asserts that not all religion is good. As we'll see from Eccl. 5, some worship is evil.
- B. Like me you may have heard comments (intended to be complimentary toward someone) that go like this: "Well at least they are going to church somewhere." Or you've heard people described as being "good church-going folks." But such sentiments do not reflect the tenor of scripture. In fact, we're warned over and over again throughout God's word to be on guard against false religion and in particular the deception of religion that comes in the name of Christ. I'm referring to those who call themselves "Christian" while adhering to doctrine that is a denial of the Christ of the Bible.
- C. Well, this morning, in examining the first 7 verses of Ecclesiastes, chapter 5, we will see God (through the penman, King Solomon) refer to some who enter the house of God to worship, but bringing with them what He calls in verse 1 the "sacrifice of fools" whereby they (unknowingly – but nonetheless) attempt to worship in a way that is actually evil in God's sight. We don't normally associate worshipping with evil, but there is worship which God sees as evil.

D. Worship can be described in 2 ways: (1) evil or (2) good – the true worship of God in Spirit and in truth. And these 2 are mutually exclusive. Right now, my and your attempts to worship God are either evil in God’s sight or else they are good – viewed as an acceptable act of obedience that redounds to God’s glory. So this morning, let’s all examine our own hearts as to whether our attempts at worship are good (acceptable and honoring to God) or evil.

III. Outline:

A. In studying this passage, I identified 3 telling categories by which the descriptions of worshippers herein could be categorized as it relates to this subject of “When Worship is Evil” in contrast to when it is good and acceptable. Consider worship in these 3 ways:

1. The perspective from which we worship: From whose viewpoint do we approach God to worship? Are we striving to understand and view things from God’s perspective or do we remain consumed with our own natural point of view.
2. Source of presumed truth or doctrine that forms the foundation of our worship: Is it God’s word or man’s word?
3. The offering or sacrifice we bring: Now today we don’t bring animals to be sacrificed on an altar as God had commanded the nation Israel under the Old Covenant. That was abolished by Christ’s fulfillment of what was being typified there. But there is still a sense in which we approach God with an offering or a sacrifice. I am referring to the ground or basis upon which we believe we are accepted before almighty God because that is what their sacrifices pictured. This speaks to our ground of salvation. And that, our ground of salvation, can be described in one of two ways, but not both. It can be likened to (1) the vain, sacrifice of fools described in verse 1 or (2) to that which is an acceptable sacrifice – pleasing in God’s sight.

B. So, as we consider this passage in more detail, keep these 3 things in mind (our perspective, the source of our doctrine, and the what is our sacrifice) in hopes it will be helpful in discerning what constitutes the proper, acceptable worship of God in contrast to vain, foolish, worship – worship that God not only calls foolish, but evil.

IV. Commentary on Eccl. 5:1-7:

A. Verses 1-3: So, let’s look at these verses in a bit more detail, starting with verse 1. It reads...

1. **Keep thy foot** <or watch your step> **when thou goest to the house of God, and be more ready to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools:** Now, I will come back and discuss this phrase, “sacrifice of fools” in more detail in a few moments. But for now, simply notice that we’re told to be more ready to hear rather than offer a foolish sacrifice.

This is an admonition for us to shut up and listen (to put it bluntly) and it is given because he says of those that offer the vain, sacrifice of fools that > ...**they consider not that they do evil**. They do not realize that their sacrifice is foolish, vain, unacceptable, because they simply do not consider it / not even bothering to evaluate whether their approach to God in worship might be evil. And as such, they do not know that it is evil. So, at some point all of us need to be stopped in our tracks and hear from God. And to do so, we need to hush with our own opinions and set aside our preconceived notions in order that God might speak unto us – that we might hear a word from Him.

2. As we continue in verse 2 of Eccl. 5, we read... ***²Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few.***

(a) He's speaking to them much like Moses did at the Red Sea when the unarmed Israelites were trapped there and Pharaoh's mighty army was in hot pursuit. As the Israelites murmured in their distress, Moses said, "Stand still (as in hush) and see the salvation of the Lord." I'm reminded of Paul's words in Romans 3:19 where he wrote, "**Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God.**" Until God shuts us up under the Gospel, we consider not (and therefore do not know) that our natural inclination as to how we are to worship and approach God is actually evil in His sight.

(b) We need to not be so rash to speak in the sense that so many urge us to, as in repeating the prescribed sinner's prayer, or making our so-called public profession or decision for Jesus, or doing our part, as is so often suggested in this easy-believism culture of religion, in order to get ourselves saved. It's as if preachers are offering up eternal salvation like the comedian, Larry, the cable guy urging their listeners to just "Git-r-done!" All you got to do is say this prayer, invite Jesus into your heart, or walk this aisle or make this profession or get baptized or go through this confirmation process or adhere to this catechism – whatever. No, we have to be shut up in offering or heeding the natural opinions of fallen sinners and be brought in guilty before God because until then, we do not even consider that our worship itself is evil. But the scripture tells us that our natural way of salvation, the "**...way that seemeth right unto a man,...**" is among the ways whose end is death." (Proverbs 16:25).

(c) In essence God's word is telling us this: Think of who you are doing business with. It is God who is in heaven and you're upon the earth. Let's get things in the right perspective. This phrase, "God in heaven" expresses His majesty, His sovereignty, His supremacy as Creator – far above us, the creature. It expresses His omniscience and His omnipotence – He is all knowing and all powerful! That's what we should have in mind when we pray after the manner of the model prayer as Christ taught, saying "Our Father which art in Heaven!" Let's hear from Him! Now remember the first 2 points I gave you to consider earlier:

(1) First: From whose perspective are we seeing things? Is it from Almighty God, the Creator who is in heaven or is it from our perspective of things – from the perspective of the mere, fallen sinful creature? Our tendency is to assume that we know how God is to be worshipped. After all, if you were like me, you were brought up in church and so it's just a matter of deciding to get serious about God and religion. And so some preacher comes along and tells us to do this or that and you too can be sure for heaven – you can get yourself saved if you'll only do your part. "Won't you let Jesus come into your heart" as some put it. And so, many of us jump on that bandwagon and get that presumed requirement checked off and thereby we gain a false sense of security in thinking we've accepted Jesus and now we're just fine.

And we never even stop to consider it from God's perspective – to ask, "How can a holy God save me, a sinner?" What would truly reconcile a sinner before a holy God? And if we're blessed to start seeing things from God's point of view, we will quickly discover what fools we were to imagine that a holy God in heaven could ever accept me (a fallen, depraved sinner here on earth) on the basis of my having accepted Him as my personal Savior – my agreement to allow God to save me. How proud to imagine that my feeble responses to almighty, holy God would be the vital, determining, crowning event upon which I am forgiven of my sins and accepted in the presence of a holy God. That is to treat what it actually takes, the precious shed blood of Christ, as if it is inferior and subordinate to what I presumed to really make the difference – my act of faith, my acceptance of the deal. That's evil worship!

(2) And then remember the 2nd category that I suggested we consider, how the source of body of truth distinguishes our worship. Notice here in verse 2 that he writes, "...**let thy words be few.**" Some writers think this may be addressed to those who would pray lengthy public prayers to impress others in their worship. And that understanding certainly may apply.

But I believe this is also a reference to the source of presumed truth upon which we enter into worship. Instead of being ready to express our opinions, as we read in verse 1, be ready to hear; the implied message being “hear from God” – not from you the creature or from the wisdom and opinion of mere sinful creatures such as you and me. The issue is, “What does God say? – What is His gospel that is to be believed? – Not natural man’s perversion of the gospel.

3. And so in verse 3 he likens it to a confused dream as he says, ***³For a dream cometh through the multitude of business; and a fool’s voice is known by multitude of words.***
- (a) I’m sure some of you have experienced restless nights where your mind raced with all the many tasks that you knew awaited you in your work or in your worries in the often hectic pace of this life. Well, this is what is being referenced when it says that “***...a dream cometh through the multitude of business;***” This is a simile, showing that just as a lack of sleep or a confused, incoherent dream may result from our being too busy – from a multitude of business; likewise, a fool’s voice is known by the multitude of words.

- (b) In the context of this passage, we do not want to be among the foolish or as one described here as a fool. This speaks of those who are deceived, who know not that what they deem to be good is actually evil in God’s sight, who (in keeping with the context of the entire book of Ecclesiastes – “vanity of vanities, all is vanity”) are worshipping in vain or foolishly. And their much speaking (to the exclusion of hearing God) makes them known as such – as fools.

If someone talks about their religious beliefs in a way that is not from God’s perspective, but rather from man’s, showing an absence of a regard for God’s honor and character in their gospel doctrine – in how they presume to be saved – they are thereby exposed as a fool to those who have been delivered from their own former deception. And the sense of this passage seems to be saying to us as naturally foolish sinners, set your own many words and natural thoughts aside and seek to hear from God! Now look with me again at verses 4-6, where we read,

- B. Verses 4-6: ***When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it; for he hath no pleasure in fools: pay that which thou hast vowed. ⁵Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay. ⁶Suffer not thy mouth to cause thy flesh to sin; neither say thou before the angel, that it was an error: wherefore should God be angry at thy voice, and destroy the work of thine hands?***

1. As I read this, I was reminded of how many stories we've all heard over the years of one who, in the middle of a predicament of sorts, prayed to God that "if you'll get me out of this one I promise _____ (something exceptional in the way of a reformation or sacrificial duties or promises of service). And more often than not, these are not followed through with as men later explain to God – Lord, you know in the panic of the situation I was confused and I am going to do better but I didn't really mean to promise that – you know I can't possibly do that or I was just under stress. Think of the evil of presuming we could promise anything to God that would indebt Him to us!
2. Well, there in verse 6, when it says "...***neither say thou before the angel, that it was an error:***" I believe this is referring to making excuses before the Lord Jesus Christ as He is referred to in Malachi 3:1 as "the angel of the covenant," – excusing why we can't keep that which we've promised or behave as we know we should. We are under no obligation to make any such vow and we're told here that it would be better if we had not.
3. Now it may seem that these verses have moved us on to a different subject, but I think in the context, it again is reminding us of who we are dealing with – God almighty in heaven. And He is not to be trifled with, or taken for granted by our casually making such commitments we are prone not to keep. We need to hush, stand still, and hear from Him so that we might learn of Him – so that our approach to Him, our sacrifice before Him might be acceptable – a sacrifice that is in sharp contrast to our being busy offering up something that proceeds from us – our promises and determinations to do better (the works of our own hands).
4. And that brings us to the concluding verse, verse 7 which I believe ties this back into the context of our passage as we read,

C. Verse 7: ***For in the multitude of dreams and many words there are also divers vanities: but fear thou God.***

1. So he is saying, that just as there are various or diverse vanities – empty, worthless, incoherent, confused thoughts in the multitude of dreams that come from our cluttered, racing minds, likewise there are many vain, empty, worthless, incoherent, confused notions found in our natural busyness in religion – in our going about to offer what he calls "the sacrifice of fools." I'm speaking of the natural religion of man from which we all need deliverance. The scripture says that we've all gone out of the way. That there is none righteous, no not one.

2. And I believe that the “abundance of words” and “the making of unfulfilled vows” are set forth here as descriptions of those who offer the sacrifice of fools, whose very worship is seen as evil in the sight of God.
3. And in the conclusion of verse 7, he says instead of worshipping in vain, “...**fear thou God.**” This sets forth what is necessary for one to come before God with a sacrifice that is acceptable – not the evil, sacrifice of fools.

D. So, what does it mean to fear God?

1. It does not mean to be afraid of him as in being frightened or scared of God. But rather in the Bible, the fear of God refers to a reverential regard for His glory – for the honor of His character – that we might worship Him as He is uniquely revealed in Christ – as both a just God and a Savior.
2. And so to fear God is the opposite of remaining oblivious to (or failing to consider) that our approach or our offering might be evil. It is the opposite of failing to think of things from God’s perspective with His glory in mind, rather than my own. In other words, we are not to gloss over that – to excuse the implications of our flawed doctrine as I once did when confronted with God’s Gospel and the evil of our former beliefs by saying, “Well, I just didn’t think of it that way,” as if that excused me.
3. In fearing God, we seek Him as He is – in awesome wonder of how God could accept me, a sinner (not the other way around) and still be God. That’s what it is to see things from God’s perspective rather than ours. How can God (who is holy and just) accept a sinner such as you and me? He is holy. He cannot commune with sin. It is only through the blood of Christ, the sinner’s Substitute who put away those sins by paying the debt in full that was due unto them before the justice of God. It took the shedding of the infinitely valuable blood of the God-man, God in the flesh, the Lord Jesus Christ.
4. And yet in our day, many of so-called “Christians” will insist that Jesus Christ died for everyone who ever lived – and so by their way of thinking, in His sacrificial, bloody death on the cross, He really did no more for those who go to hell than He did for those who are saved. Well, the implications of such thoughts are profound. They are evil. For such teaching has us imagining that something else – not Christ and His finished work made the real difference in our salvation. And it shows no fear of God before their eyes. It reveals that at that point in time, they are not even considering how God could be holy and just in punishing Christ for the sins of any sinner and still send that sinner to hell anyway. It’s to not see how such thoughts actually accuse God of being an unjust monster. Clearly, that ‘christ’ didn’t get the job done. That would mean he actually redeemed no one and so there remains some busyness for the sinner to do to make the real difference in their salvation – or so they tragically imagine.

V. Verse 1: Now before we close, I want to go back to verse 1 and consider again, “When Worship is Evil.” As that verse reads, “***Keep thy foot*** <watch or guard your step, your ways> ***when thou goest to the house of God, and be more ready to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools: for they consider not that they do evil.***”

A. And that brings us to that 3rd consideration I asked you to keep in mind. Specifically, let us consider the offering or sacrifice we bring. I am speaking of the basis upon which we consider ourselves to be accepted before almighty God so as to worship Him. This speaks to our ground of salvation. And verse 1 warns us to not bring the sacrifice of fools, which is evil. And yet when we all initially approached God in our blind, lost spiritual state, we had no idea at that time that it was akin to offering the sacrifice of fools. As this scripture bears out, we didn’t even consider that possibility. And none of us do until God, in the day of His power, brings us to hear from Him under the sound of this Gospel of grace – God’s gospel wherein we behold His glory in the person and work of Christ!

B. So, as we seek to apply what this passage teaches concerning our own worship, think of your offering or sacrifice in the same way that those literal sacrifices were to be offered as recorded in the Old Testament. Today, we do not offer the blood of animals upon an altar. But how we approach God in worship (the equivalent of our sacrifice or offering so to speak) certainly should have in mind that which God was teaching and typifying in those old animal sacrifices, if it is to be acceptable before God. This consideration of what distinguishes (1) approaching God with the evil, sacrifice of fools from (2) an approach to God that is acceptable in His sight, is as old and as simple to understand as that which we have recorded for us in the story of the first family – in two of Adam and Eve’s sons, Cain and Abel.

VI. Cain and Abel:

A. In Genesis 4: verse 2 we’re told that, “***...Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground. ³And in process of time it came to pass, that Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the LORD. ⁴And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof. And the LORD had respect unto Abel and to his offering: ⁵But unto Cain and to his offering he had not respect. And Cain was very wroth, and his countenance fell.***” They both were engaged in worship. One’s worship was acceptable, the other was evil. Cain brought the fruit of the ground, which he had worked to raise; and Abel brought a lamb.

B. Now notice from Genesis 4, verses 4 & 5, that the Lord's respect and acceptance (or disrespect and rejection) of the person and the sacrifice are one and the same. So it is key for us to understand what the difference is between the two sacrifices? They both brought the best products of their respective professions so Cain's inferior sacrifice could not be owing to it being anything less than his best in comparison to Abel's best. That isn't the issue. While Cain brought the very best that he could offer – the fruits of his own work, what distinguished Abel's offering is that it was a blood offering!

C. What was wrong with Cain's sacrifice?

1. It was a bloodless sacrifice and so a denial of the necessity that God's law and justice be perfectly fulfilled – denying the need for a righteousness that we cannot provide for ourselves.
2. Just as we read in Ecclesiastes 5, Cain didn't consider this offering or "sacrifice of fools" to be evil (surely not his act of worship) and yet his offering exposed that he had no fear of God – he was not considering it from God's perspective – having no regard for God as He is for it is apparent that it did not even dawn on Cain how insufficient the product of his own works were. Cain likely saw no difference in their offerings. It seems reasonable that he viewed this as many others do in our day – thinking that Abel was bringing a lamb because he was a shepherd just as Cain presented the fruit of the field because he was a farmer. And yet Cain's lack of understanding of what was required, unlike that reflected in Abel's sacrifice, showed a lack of recognition of his own sinfulness, his depravity, his guilt and defilement.
3. Cain's offering denied his need of a Redeemer, the Lord Jesus Christ, to pay (by the shedding of His blood) the debt before God's justice that was owed due unto Cain's sins. Cain would be his own mediator, and his own intercessor.
4. So Cain's offering exalted himself, his own works and efforts and denied that he deserved condemnation and death if judged by his very best efforts to serve God. He approached God on the grounds of his own merit and works. He had worked hard and was proud of the fruit of his fields.
5. Cain's offering was not an evidence of God-given faith, but of unbelief and disobedience as he refused God's way of atonement, acceptance, and worship and brought instead, what he thought best – what seemed right to him. And so do many today when they approach God expecting to be accepted because of their act or their exercise of faith.

D. Why did God have respect unto Abel's offering?

1. It was an offering of blood in recognition of the necessity that a perfect satisfaction to God's holy law and inflexible justice must be rendered by Christ's bloody death in order for God to save any sinner. Unlike Cain, the significance of his offering had nothing to do with being a product of his profession as a shepherd. No – it was because he offered blood, typifying the necessity of the shed blood of the promised Messiah – the blood of the Lamb of God, the Lord Jesus Christ Himself.
2. It was a confession in recognition of his own sin, depravity, guilt, and defilement. Abel came humbly before God, realizing his need of a substitute, needing a righteousness or satisfaction to be made to the justice of God that he could not produce for himself, this all being typified by the blood of the animal he offered.
3. It was a confession of the inadequacy of his best efforts to keep the law, to perfectly obey God so as to establish a righteousness of his own.
4. Abel's was an offering of true, God-given faith as we're explicitly told just that in Hebrews 11:4 where it reads: ***"By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts: and by it <his offering> he being dead yet speaketh."*** And we had better listen. Notice that Abel did not become righteous by offering the blood sacrifice, but rather it gave evidence that he was righteous – God having accounted unto Him the very righteousness that Christ would in time accomplish for Him on Calvary's cross. Abel believed and obeyed God. He came to God the way God told him to come, the way His word tells us all to come.

VII. Closing:

- A. So, here's the long and short of it. If you want to know if your faith is genuine, then consider your sacrifice / your offering / the basis upon which you approach God for acceptance – for salvation. If it is by genuine, God-given faith – you'll bring the sacrifice of Abel. To do that is to be able to sing afresh that old hymn, "Nothing but the Blood" because now, unlike before, you really mean it. What can wash away my sins? Nothing but the blood of Jesus! In contrast to that, if your salvation is based upon anything other than or in addition to the satisfaction Christ rendered in His obedience unto death, you bring the sacrifice of Cain – the sacrifice of fools brought by those who have yet to see (by the eye of faith) that it is evil. Now that is when well-intentioned, sincere, religious worship is actually evil in God's sight.

- B. The Psalmist wrote in Psalm 51:17, ***“The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.”*** All who are saved must and will be broken – brought to bow in the fear of God so as to plead Christ’s blood and righteousness alone – the offering He made for all whom He saves.
- C. I pray for all that hear this message. In keeping with the teaching of Eccl. 5, may your words be few. May God grant someone you saving grace – so as to have no other plea before God in heaven than that of the justified, saved publican as recorded in Luke 18. In that parable, his justification before God (his very salvation) was evidenced by his few words – his simple cry, ***“...God be merciful <propitious> to me a sinner.”*** May we truly approach God as mercy beggars, seeking salvation based upon nothing but the blood!

Footnote from the author: While this sermon was prepared and delivered by me, I often utilize the commentaries, study helps, and teachings of others to supplement my own prayerful study of the scriptures. Since this document was not originally prepared for publication in print, please excuse and recognize that it was unfeasible to properly identify and credit all of the various original sources used to develop the content herein. Ultimately, it is my sincere and foremost objective to accurately present the gospel of God’s grace found in the only infallible source, God’s word itself – the Bible.