

“Essentials for Worship”

Ecclesiastes 5:1-7

Turn with me in your Bible to the fifth chapter of the book of Ecclesiastes. For those of you who perhaps are joining us as guests this morning, we've been in a study of this book for the last several weeks in a series that I've called, “The Search for Happiness.” Ecclesiastes is a remarkable book that shows us how true happiness, lasting contentment, or real satisfaction cannot be found under the sun, but only in Christ. We find life, not in the pursuit of temporary things in life, but by losing our lives for Christ's sake. It is only as we delight in Him that we discover true satisfaction.

In the past couple of chapters, Solomon uses the language of the courtroom and the language of the palace. Here we will find him using the language of the **temple**. We have already seen how he took a close look at what would seem to be secular matters, such as issues of pleasure-seeking, work, justice, and the value of relationships. He now takes up the subject of **worship**.

There is not a more important subject than worship. It is the most important thing about you. We tend to think of worship as occupying a part of our lives, when in reality it is an all-encompassing issue. We can't compartmentalize it.

Worship is not simply something that we do; worship is to characterize who we are. Worship is to the Christian life what the mainspring is to a watch, what the engine is to a car. It is the core, most essential element. Worship is all that we are responding to all that God is.

William Temple—“...*worship is the submission of all our nature to God. It is the quickening of conscience by His holiness; the nourishment of mind with His truth; the purifying of imagination by His beauty; the opening of the heart to His love; the surrender of the will to His purpose—and all of this gathered up in adoration, the most selfless emotion of which our nature is capable and therefore the chief*

remedy for that self-centeredness which is our original sin and the source of all actual sin.”

Worship is all of me worshiping God for all that He is and all that He has done. True worship so satisfies our total person that we don't have to shop around for man-made substitutes. It is the most important issue of our heart.

Within this text, the Preacher addresses us directly and gives us tangible, practical instructions for worship. He is exhorting us in the way that we live our life and approach God. Ryken says that he “is speaking to just about everyone who ever goes to church.”

Philip Ryken—*“His exhortations are for people who do go to church but sometimes find it hard to pay attention, whose thoughts wander when they pray, and who are full of good intentions about serving God but have trouble following through.”*

It is worship and the worshiper that Solomon takes a close look at here in the fifth chapter of Ecclesiastes. He begins this next section with a very practical call to be faithful, truthful, and even fearful in our worship of God. There are three or four ‘essentials’ for worship that he gives us.

1. Assembling in the HOUSE of God (5:1a)

“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.”

The scene that is being described here in the text is that of a worshiper on his way to the ‘house’ of God, the temple, which served as the sanctuary. The temple was central to worship in the Old Testament. It was the one place where God's presence dwelt with His people.

Perhaps the Preacher watched as all of the worshippers would come and go from the temple complex. Maybe he observed as they offered sacrifices, lifted their hands in praise, and made certain vows. He saw that many of them were not sincere in their worship, and they left in worse condition than when they came. Why? Because their worship was merely routine, insincere, and hypocritical.

Corporate worship was very important in the Old Testament and yet it was also very different than it is today. Under the old covenant, the worshiper had to present himself to the priest in the temple. He came with a sacrificial animal to be offered on his behalf. The walls, the blood, and the curtain would all serve as a very vivid reminder that God wanted to dwell with His people, yet their sins put a barrier between them and their God. They needed a priest to constantly mediate on their behalf. Over time, this became ritualistic and hollow and the worshippers would causally come and go through the motions, but their hearts were somewhere far off.

Solomon's exhortation here is this—"Tread lightly when you assemble for worship!" Pay close attention to your steps, to your motives, to the way that you approach a holy God. And notice that he says 'when' you go to the house of God, not 'if' you go. It is implicit within his instruction here that God's people gather together in God's place.

Corporate worship is not optional, but essential. It is to be understood that the people of God assemble on a regular and consistent basis to worship God together. While it is true that we no longer come to a centralized location to be in God's presence, we nonetheless are to assemble and present ourselves together. As the church, we are the house of God. And every brick is vitally important.

And yet if you are not extremely diligent, you can leave a worship service worse off than when you came. That's why you must guard your steps, stay alert, and pay attention when you go to the house of God.

Don't be mindlessly unengaged, but be alert and tuned in to what is happening. Don't come as a critical spectator but as an eager participator. We are to prepare ourselves for worship. How so?

- Prayer and gratitude in your heart
- Bible in your hand
- Readiness to submit your will
- Sensitivity toward others in your path
- Generosity with your resources

Listen to the words of the Preacher here! Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Be extremely careful that you are not overly familiar and without heart.

2. Responding to the WORD of God (5:1b)

“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.”

In addition to preparation for worship, notice that Solomon also calls attention to the need for concentration in worship. The Preacher assumes that when people assemble in the house of God, there will be something for them to hear. He says that we are to draw near to listen. Listen to what? We are to listen to the voice of God as revealed through His Word. God's Word is central to worship.

“Listen”—*it is the Hebrew word ‘shema’; means obey; used in all 39 books of the Old Testament*

Deuteronomy 6:1—**“Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!”**

The emphasis of the word is hearing to obey. God has a word for His people when they gather together for worship. The word that you need is not my word or someone else’s word, but God’s own Word. When we draw near, we are to listen. And we must listen for the sake of obedience. Worship has to do with whether or not you obey the revealed will of God as laid out in the Bible. Let me tell you something—you can attend as many worship gatherings as you want, sing as loud as you want, but if you don’t obey the Word of God, you have a problem.

Revelation is key when it comes to worship. The great and awesome God of the universe wants us to worship Him for who He is and what He has done, and He has revealed that to us right here in His Word.

Our worship is often shallow and dull because we’ve lost sight of who God is. There is something about opening up the Scriptures and allowing its penetrating truth to speak for itself, to get a hold of us and burn its way through the fog that often clouds our view.

Hebrews tells us how this is so:

Hebrews 4:12—**“For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”**

There is nothing dull and boring about the living and active Word of God! The writer of Hebrews points out two things that it does:

- It pierces; means that it cuts through

- It discerns; we get the word 'critic' from it

This is what we must keep in view before us when we go to the house of God. When we draw near, we must listen to the Word and respond to the Word in proper fashion. It is a reminder that worship is not simply a matter of emotion but also of the mind and will.

Solomon says, "Listen carefully, for the truth is about to be spoken and is designed to change your life." And yet the truth that is spoken will do you no good apart from carefully listening with the intention of immediately obeying. He then contrasts the listener with the one who offers what he calls the 'sacrifice of fools.'

The one who offers the sacrifice of fools is the one who is flippant. His worship is not according to truth, neither is it offered in sincerity of heart and life. It is merely formalism that performs ritual to gain God's favor, yet the heart of the worshiper is really far from God. The sacrifice of fools is ritual without repentance, works without faith, service without surrender, and talk without walk. It is religious form without spiritual substance. Paul describes it as:

2 Timothy 3:5—“...having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people.”

Notice the Preacher describes it as the sacrifice of fools. The fool is the person who hears but doesn't pay attention. Fools like to talk a whole lot more than they like to listen.

The word used here is only found in the wisdom literature of the Old Testament—3 times in Psalms, 17 times here in Ecclesiastes, and 49 times in Proverbs. No book of the Bible talks about the fool more than Proverbs. And listen to how often fools are marked by their words:

Proverbs 1:22—“Scoffers delight themselves in scoffing and fools hate knowledge.”

Proverbs 1:32—“...the complacency of fools will kill them.”

Proverbs 12:23—“A prudent man conceals knowledge, but the heart of fools proclaims folly.”

Proverbs 14:7—“Leave the presence of a fool, or you will not discern words of knowledge.”

Proverbs 15:2—“The tongue of the wise makes knowledge acceptable, but the mouth of fools spouts folly.”

Proverbs 18:2—“A fool does not delight in understanding, but only in revealing his own mind.”

Proverbs 28:26—“He who trusts in his own heart is a fool, but he who walks wisely will be delivered.”

Proverbs 29:20—“Do you see a man who is hasty in his words? There is more hope for a fool than for him.”

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. Don't be deceived into thinking that you can offer God things like money, attendance, and service simply because you think it will cause Him to give you what you want. God isn't impressed by the amount of money you place in the offering plate. He isn't impressed by the number of times you volunteered to serve. He can see through all that you offer Him, and if it isn't done in faith from a heart that truly loves Him, its foolish sacrifice.

Only a fool would despise the Word of God. Only a fool would trust his own heart. Only a fool would put his mouth in gear before his brain. Only a fool would dare to offer half-hearted and insincere worship to a holy God.

3. Living for the GLORY of God (5:2-3)

“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. For a dream comes with much business, and a fool’s voice with many words.”

Worship involves responding to the Word of God, and it also involves living for the glory of God. Notice that the Preacher warns us against hasty speech offered to God, which is descriptive of prayer.

Solomon offers us this helpful admonition—“Be not rash with your mouth.” One paraphrases this way:

Message—*“Don’t shoot off your mouth, or speak before you think. Don’t be too quick to tell God what you think He wants to hear. God’s in charge, not you—the less you speak, the better.”*

Don’t put your mouth in gear before your brain has a chance to warm up. Don’t offer God words that are not according to knowledge, worship that is without passion, and lip service apart from heart surrender. Solomon gives us a warning against empty and careless words in worship.

David Jeremiah—*“When we come into the house of God, we’re to draw near to hear, to understand, to learn, and to worship. We’re to cultivate an attitude of reverence, expectation, and a holy sense of resignation to His will.”*

You and I should not be hasty when it comes to speaking about God or the things of God. He is in heaven, and we are on earth. We are told to let our words be few.

Psalm 46:10—“Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!”

It is extremely hard to be still in such a fast paced society. I mean we are constantly on the go. There’s always some place to go, someone to see, and something to do. We live our lives these days in the fast lane. True and authentic worship demands that we get still. I am to ‘know’ that He is God and that He is high and exalted.

God is in heaven and we are on earth. The idea is that we need to remember who we are in light of who He is. He is vast beyond measure, I am small. He is omnipotent, I am weak. He is all-wise and all-knowing, I am ignorant. True worship keeps things in perspective.

A.W. Tozer—*“True religion confronts earth with heaven and brings eternity to bear upon time...I refer to the loss of the concept of majesty from the popular religious mind. The church has surrendered her once lofty concept of God and has substituted for it one so low, so ignoble...The low view of God entertained almost universally among Christians is the cause of a hundred lesser evils everywhere among us. We’ve lost a spirit of worship and ability to withdraw inwardly to meet God in adoring silence.”*

American Christianity has become me-centered rather than God-centered. We consume devotional material that is full of tips about how to have a better day, but says little about the transcendent glory of God. And it is now possible to go to church and hear little about God and much about you.

We've made God a means to an end. Instead, real worship from the heart sees God as the end.

Psalm 34:8—“Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good!”

Sometimes, unbelievers often use natural disasters as an excuse in their attempt to argue a loving God would not allow such things to happen. They will say, “What kind of God would ever allow terrible things to happen to innocent people?”

Their attitude is summed up in a parody of the doxology:

*Blame God from whom all cyclones blow,
Blame Him, all creatures here below.
Blame Him, who knocks down church and steeple,
Who sends the floods, and drowns the people.*

Some want to blame God for problems and heartbreaks and disappointments in life. Let your words be few!

The idea here is that just as the more a person works, the more a person dreams. And the more a person speaks, the more opportunity there is to reveal his folly. For that reason, the Preacher says, “Be not rash with your mouth!”

4. Walking in the FEAR of God (5:4-7)

“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? For when dreams increase and words grow many, there is vanity; but God is the One you must fear.”

The fourth essential for worship that Solomon mentions in this passage is the fear of God. As a worshiper, I am to assemble in the house of God, respond to the Word of God, live for the glory of God, and walk in the fear of God.

“Fear”—*reverential awe; response to God’s holiness*

We have a hard time coming to grips with the concept of the ‘fear’ of God because we live in a culture that resists authority where ‘self’ is king. Godly fear has a practical expression. These verses here are some of the most overlooked words in all the Bible, especially in a day of such shallow and superficial commitments.

Because we fear God, we are to honor the vows that we make. In other words, worship demands we do what we say we are going to do. It is an integrity issue.

It was not uncommon for people to make certain vows in biblical times when they gathered for worship. Whether it involved a vow to be obedient in some area, or whether it was a vow to serve in some way. The psalms refer to this in several places:

Psalm 50:14—“Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and perform your vows to the Most High.”

Psalm 65:1—“Praise is due to You, O God, in Zion, and to You shall vows be performed.”

Psalm 76:11—“Make your vows to the Lord your God and perform them; let all around Him bring gifts to Him who is to be feared.”

There are examples of this throughout the Old Testament, such as Hannah who vowed to dedicate her firstborn son to the ministry of the tabernacle. Solomon speaks here about a holy promise to offer God a gift or a sacrifice. His point is

this—if we make a vow, we need to do what we say. It is much easier to make a vow than to keep it.

Matthew 21:28-31—“What do you think? A man had two sons. And he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ And he answered, ‘I will not,’ but afterward he changed his mind and went. And he went to the other son and said the same. And he answered, ‘I go, sir,’ but did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?”

Integrity in worship demands that we honor our vows. It is an issue of whether or not I truly fear God from the heart. I will follow through on my word because God is holy and worthy of my worship. Perhaps one of the most important sentences in this passage is found there in verse 6—“Let not your mouth lead you into sin.”

All of us have failed here at various points in our lives, haven’t we? There is none of us who is perfect in speech, who have always done what we promised to do. We’ve been rash with our mouth and hasty in our words. We’ve not always guarded our steps when we’ve come to the house of God. We’ve all offered half-hearted worship.

We can only cast ourselves on the mercy of Christ, for He is the only One who has ever offered a perfect sacrifice. We must remember that it is not our sacrifice that saves us, but His sacrifice. (see Hebrews 10:1-25)

Danny Akin—“Despite our careless words and empty religion, Jesus brings us back to God. He fully cleanses us and allows us to come boldly before God’s throne. We do this individually in prayer and private worship. Jesus makes this clear in John 4 with the woman at the well. You no longer have to go to a specific physical location to worship God. You can pray and worship Him anywhere. But while we can approach God in private worship, we approach Him in a special way in corporate worship. Now, according to Ephesians 2, we are the new temple where God dwells...We draw near to God’s presence in

corporate worship to listen to God and to make an offering with reverence and awe. But now we do not offer animals; we offer our bodies!”

Christ died for my sins to save me and make a worshiper out of me. It is only through Jesus Christ that I now can worship God, and I can boldly approach the throne of grace through Him and:

- Assemble in the house of God
- Respond to the Word of God
- Live for the glory of God
- Walk in the fear of God