

Meaningful and Meaningless Worship Ecclesiastes 5:1-7, Exodus 3:1-6

Slide 1

Why do we even bother going to church? If I were to take a poll, not just of you here today, but the man on the street, too, I'd probably get answers, like tradition, pressure from a spouse, a sense of guilt, or the music.

A few might even say they come for the preaching, while some may actually say they come to worship God, which is the real reason we should come to church.

But the real question shouldn't be "Why do we come to church," rather "What makes worship meaningful" and the best way to discover that is to find out what makes worship meaningless.

For the past few weeks, we've been studying Solomon's pursuit of the meaning of life apart from God, but today, he seems to take an interlude.

In today's passage, it looks like he's trying to examine this meaning from the perspective of the Old Testament temple in Jerusalem.

This is the temple he built, furnished, and instituted policies and procedures. He wanted to make it an efficient and effective worship center.

As we read these first few verses, we really don't know the situation. As I've said before, some suspect he's writing the book of Ecclesiastes as an elderly man, reflecting back on his life.

Possibly, he had gone to the temple, sat on the steps, and begun to watch and examine the people as they came and went through the temple during the various festivals that took place.

I suspect, like anybody else observing people coming out of church, he might've been a little discouraged.

He probably saw people who only came to the temple out of tradition, or because they were feeling pressured by a spouse, or maybe they were feeling a sense of guilt.

Maybe they knew, when they offered a sacrifice, that there was often meat left over which they could eat.

This probably left a negative taste in Solomon's mouth. It's under this backdrop that examine our scripture for today.

Slide 2

Like I mentioned earlier, in these first seven verses of chapter 5, Solomon's at the temple studying the various people who came through it, realizing that some of them weren't taking worship as seriously as they should be.

In this passage he gives a series of instructions or commands, which technically are called imperatives, to the readers.

We don't know who those readers were, but he seems to give out a series of commands on how they should act within the temple environment.

He first tells them in Ecclesiastes 5:1a that they must, "*Guard your steps when you go to the house of God.*"

Now, when he said, "*guard your steps,*" this meant for the individual to be aware of what's happening. When he used the words "*house of God,*" he's was referring to the temple.

Oftentimes, the temple would be referred to as the house of God because in Old Testament days they believed that the spirit of God physically lived within the temple building.

Today, we know that God doesn't reside in any particular building or denomination, but we should be aware that whenever we enter our church we're entering into the presence of God.

In fact, when we come to church, we should have the same attitude Moses had when he encountered God in the burning bush in Exodus 3.

Exodus 3:1-6, "Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up." When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!" And Moses said, "Here I am." "Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." Then he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God."

Imagine Moses hearing God's voice come out of a bush. He doesn't know what's going on, but as he gets closer, he realizes that it's actually God speaking to him.

Then, when God said, *"Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground,"* Moses gets so panicky he covers his face.

Do we have that same sense of anticipation when we come into this building? Do we expect to meet God here? Do we get excited with anticipation that we're going to meet God.

Do we actually anticipate and believe that, when we're here individually or collectively, God Himself is in this place?

If everyone had an attitude like that, think how it would change our view of worship. That's what Solomon's trying to get across.

He's telling us to guard our steps when we go to church, because when we enter into this building, we're entering into the very presence of God.

Slide 3

Then he tells the reader in Ecclesiastes 5:1b, "*Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong.*"

They're in a temple situation where animals, grains, and different oils were sacrificed. A reverent type of place with protocols not too different from today.

A rabbi or teacher would open up a big scroll and read through select passages of the scriptures that were available to them. He would then interpret it for the people, giving them a lesson and an application.

Then there would be a time of prayer, possibly a song followed by a blessing or a benediction as the people left.

Many modern-day churches are modeled off this Old Testament temple system, aside from the sacrifice of animals.

We know that through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ we don't have to offer animal sacrifices anymore.

The point is that people should go to listen. “*Listen,*” as it’s understood here, has the idea of understanding and application. “*To listen*” isn’t just to hear with our ears but to hear with our heart and then apply it.

This was in contrast to “*the sacrifice of fools.*” When we think of a fool, we think of somebody who’s lacking intelligence.

In the Old Testament, the term fool is used to describe, not someone who’s lacking mental intelligence, but a person who lacks spiritual intelligence.

In other words, it’s a person who lacks the wisdom and knowledge that they should be worshiping God almighty, the God that made him.

The sacrifice of a fool was when someone tried to offer a defective animal and still expect atonement for their sins. While Solomon referred to this person as a fool, Malachi referred to this person as a cheater.

Malachi 1:14, “*Cursed is the cheat who has an acceptable male in his flock and vows to give it, but then sacrifices a blemished animal to the Lord.*”

A fool or a cheater was someone who had an acceptable animal but chose to give something less to the Lord.

We know that even today, when we offer our sacrifices, which in many cases has to do with our time, talent, and treasures, we don’t always offer our best.

We offer a diminished part of ourselves. What we’re really offering is the sacrifice of a fool. In other words, a sacrifice that lacks any sense of substance or meaning.

In these opening sections, Solomon's reminding us that as we step into the presence of God, when we're meeting God, we shouldn't be offering empty sacrifices, but the sacrifice of ourselves.

We should be placing ourselves on the altar, listening to and receiving what God's giving us and putting it into application.

Slide 4

Then he goes on to talk about what I would consider prayer. He doesn't mention the word prayer, but he writes:

Ecclesiastes 5:2-3, "Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few. A dream comes when there are many cares, and many words mark the speech of a fool."

In Biblical times, there were many pagan religions. Much of their worship was similar to Jewish worship as they incorporated sacrifices and prayers, and during their worship services these pagans would do a lot of praying.

They felt the more words they offered in their prayers, the more likely that god or goddess would hear their prayers, their incantations, their magic spells or whatever.

In the first part of verse 2, Solomon warned the people that there was a great distance between God and man, but he wasn't talking about physical distance.

Looking at it from an angle under the sun, Solomon was saying that there's a spiritual separation between God and man.

It's an angle that many of us, or at least people out in the world, tend to view God. God's way out there and wants nothing to do with us.

Solomon visualized God behind a wall or, specifically, a curtain that couldn't be separated. Only certain people could go behind it into what was called the holy of holies. Solomon had a hands-off type of view of God,

We can't fault him since he didn't live during the time of Christ, during His crucifixion, death, burial, and resurrection.

We know that when Christ came and offered that one-time sacrifice, specifically His death, burial, and resurrection, the curtain was torn in two.

This is why Hebrews talks about how, through the blood of Christ, Jesus became a new doorway or entryway into the throne room of God.

Hebrews 10:19-20, *"Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body."*

In other words, Jesus broke down that dividing wall between us and God, creating a wonderful, spiritual, intimate relationship that He compares as a son and father or a daughter and father.

In Galatians 4:6, Paul speaks of this same idea when he wrote, *"Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, 'Abba, Father.'"*

This speaks about how we have the spirit of God dwelling within us. Such an intimate relationship that we can refer to God as father or as Paul says *Abba*.

That's the relationship we have with the Father through the blood of Jesus Christ. This is why today we can have a conversational relationship with God.

Some people are terrified to pray not because they're worried about what God would think about them, they're worried about what other people think.

Then, in the second part of verse 2, Solomon warns the people to "*let your words be few,*" because, as humans, we tend to enjoy speaking a lot.

Maybe it's a pride thing, but when we get in certain prayer circles, we feel we have to go on and on and on. The question is, at what time in prayer do we stop talking to God and begin talking to other people.

Don't get me wrong, there's an appropriate time for lengthy prayers. But I think when some people begin to speak too long, when they're spend time looking for the right words to say, they're looking for quantity over quality.

They believe that God will only hear them if the right words are used or if they use enough words. What happens in this situation, more often than not, is that people get turned off.

I suspect that even God gets turned off because, after a while, the person isn't even thinking about their words. It becomes empty chatter, meaningless. This is why Solomon's warning us to be careful with our words.

In fact, even Jesus reminds us of this in Matthew 6:7-8, "*And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like the pagans for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your father knows what you need before you ask him.*"

Babbling is empty words. It's just talking and talking and talking. The words are empty.

A couple of verses earlier, Jesus gave instructions on prayer, and after that admonition, He leads into what we call The Lord's Prayer, "*Our Father, who art in heaven...*"

As our Father, God already knows what we need before we ask Him. That's why we don't need to babble on and on because God knows what we need.

Slide 5

Solomon also knew that, when people started to babble, they would stop paying attention to what they were saying and end up making a vow. We must be careful of making vows.

Ecclesiastes 5:4-6, "When you make a vow to God, do not delay to fulfill it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow. It is better not to make a vow than to make one and not fulfill it. Do not let your mouth lead you into sin. And do not protest to the temple messenger, "My vow was a mistake." Why should God be angry at what you say and destroy the work of your hands?"

What Solomon's suggesting is when we make a vow that we don't keep, it leads us into sin. A vow is a promise to God. God if you do this, then I will do that.

This concept of a broken vow being a sin is based on Deuteronomy 23:21-22, "*If you make a vow to the Lord your God, do not be slow to pay it for the Lord your God will certainly demand it of you and you will be guilty of sin. But if you refrain from making a vow, you will not be guilty of sin.*"

Vows were very common in the temple system in the Old Testament. If you type in the word “vow,” in a Bible word search, you’ll find a lot of places in the Old Testament where people made or took vows.

Like Hannah, a barren woman who wanted to have a child. She made a vow to God saying, *“If you give me this child, then I will commit this child to serve you.”*

Sure enough, she had a baby, a little boy, and she submitted that child to God for service, but even in the New Testament we find people taking vows.

Paul made a vow when he was leaving Corinth. Acts 18:18b, *“Before he sailed, he had his hair cut off at Cenchreae (sin-cree-a) because of a vow he had taken.”*

We don’t know what the vow was, but apparently he said, *“If you do this, I will shave off my hair.”* He fulfilled that vow.

The point being that vows were taken seriously because people knew they had to keep them. Even rash vows had to be kept.

How many of you know the story of Jephthah, a judge of Israel who was called to fight the Ammonites. Listen to his rash vow.

Judges 11:30, *“And Jephthah made a vow to the Lord: ‘If you give the Ammonites into my hands, whatever comes out the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the Lord’s and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering.’”*

Then in verse 34, who came out the door first? His daughter! It says, *“When Jephthah returned to his home in Mizpah, who should come out to meet him but his daughter, dancing to the sounds of timbrels!”*

She was all excited he was coming home. *“She was an only child. Except for her he had neither son nor daughter. When he saw her, he tore his clothes and cried, ‘Oh, my daughter! You have made me miserable and wretched because I have made a vow to the Lord that I cannot break.’”*

It doesn't tell everything that happened, but she was finally offered as a sacrifice. Again, a warning about making vows.

I don't think we take vows seriously today. If we break them, we break them because who cares.

Think about marriage. We take these beautiful vows and say beautiful things to each other, forgetting that not only are we making a vow to the other person, but we're making a vow to God. That's a serious thing.

Then there's a vow that most Christians take only once in their life, the vow of baptism. Baptism is a vow. When you're baptized, you're vowing to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

In essence you're saying, I'm putting away my past. I'm walking forward. I'm not looking behind. I'm going to follow You whatever.

Then we get people who say it's too hard. I don't like this Christian thing anymore. Within two or three weeks, they're back to their old ways.

Baptism isn't something you just do and you're done. Baptism is your ordination to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. It's the beginning of your ministry.

If you want to be baptized, don't do it just to get your ticket into heaven. Do it because you want to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

We take vows all the time. God if you heal me from this or if you get me out of the debt, I'll serve you.

What happens is when you get out of debt or when you get healed, you forget that vow. We're all guilty of making empty promises. Those are what are called the sacrifices of fools.

Slide 6

Conclusion

In closing, Solomon wraps this up with a nice summary statement. Ecclesiastes 5:7, *"Much dreaming and many words are meaningless. Therefore fear God."*

He ends this section the way he ends a lot of other sections. He's saying, *"When I see that type of worship going on. When I see those broken vows. When I see that type of thing. When I see the empty prayers. It seems to make life meaningless."*

The corrective action for that is to stand in awe of God, *"fear God."* Solomon's saying get back to your understanding of God. There's nobody in this room, including me, who has a complete understanding of God.

There's always something new to learn about God. As we learn about God, as we learn about His grace, His goodness, His character, His love, and His power, we can't help but stand in awe of Him.

When we learn to stand in awe of God, those other things don't become an issue any more.

We know if we're standing in awe of God, that when we get up Sunday morning, we're not going to church just to see other people or for tradition or whatever.

We're going to church to meet God. In fact, we should probably take our shoes off when we come into the church because we're standing on holy ground.

We must take the whole idea of walking into the presence of God seriously and, as we learn what it means to stand in awe of God, we'll begin to develop that habit.

No matter what anybody else is doing around us, when we come to church, we know that we're coming into the presence of God.

We also know that when we stand firm, it means that when we come to church our minds won't be wandering elsewhere.

We'll actually say, *"I think God's going to give me something today. I anticipate something wonderful is going to come. I expect that something is going to be said through the sermon, music, or possibly even another believer that's going to impact my life in an amazing way."*

When we stand in awe of God, our prayers take on more substance. When we're around people that have a close encounter with God, when they pray, every word has substance to it. It's not just rambling.

People that have a great relationship with God don't have to use a lot of words because the words they choose, even though they may be few, are powerful. They have impact.

As you stand in awe of God, as you begin to understand God, you begin to be a real prayer warrior.

Finally, vows. We're all guilty of taking vows. Think of how many times we've made promises to other people. Start by fixing those VOWS.

Start by making things right with people to whom you might have made a promise and for some reason you decided that you're not going fulfill that promise.

Remember, you're not just making that promise to the other person, you're making that promise to God. God's going to hold you accountable, so when you don't follow through with that vow, it's a sin.

I don't make this stuff up. It's clear that when you make a vow as a Christian in the presence of God, and you don't carry that vow, intentionally you sin.

I know there may be times we can't keep it, but when this happens we need to seek repentance from God.

There might not even be a way to make it up, but if we've made a vow that we know we can still do good on, we need to do good on it.

We need to apply what Solomon's saying to our life. That's why we must have a sense of anticipation when we come into this building. When we enter this building, we need to expect to meet God because, as we enter those doors, we're on holy ground.