

Worship with Care  
Ecclesiastes 5:1-17  
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As he said his prayers on Sunday evening, a little boy was overheard saying, "Dear God, we had a great time at church today, I sure wish you could have been there."

Now, unfortunately, that little boy has a point. Many folks have come away from a church service on Sunday without really having experienced the presence of God. Yet, the fact His presence is not always noticed, doesn't mean the Lord is not here. Folks, I believe it is important we as Christians realize that when we gather for corporate worship we do so in the presence of God or, as some say in Latin, CORAM DEO, before the face of God.

When we understand this, I believe not only will our times of worship be more authentic and meaningful, but I believe that life and ministry of our church will be strengthened. That is why I want us to gather to worship on Sundays not just out of habit, but rather with a longing to meet with the Triune God.

I find it a pleasant surprise that a plea for serious worship is found in the book of Ecclesiastes. This summer we have been on a journey through this Old Testament book, which is really King Solomon's special diary. His basic message has been life lived apart from God, is meaningless and empty, or the Hebrew, "HEVEL." In fact, in chapter 4 He says, without God, dead people are better off than the living and that most fortunately of all are those who have never been born. Not exactly an optimist.

Now when we reach the end of the book we will see Solomon's conclusion is that Life is worth living when we are trusting the Lord. But there are plenty of words of pessimism before we get there. However, during this rather dark journey we occasionally run into an oasis of light and truth. We have reached one this morning is chapter 5:1-7. After looking at life from a temporal, secular perspective, what he calls "under the sun," Solomon abruptly turns his attention to the eternal and sacred, to the worship of the true and living God. I am not really sure how these words fit in with the flow of the book, but the holy spirit inspired Solomon to write them. They are God's words for us and remind us that the Lord wants us to grow as worshipers. Let's pause and pray that would happen today. ++

Eccl. 5:1a "Guard your steps when you go to the house of God." That is the theme of our text. Be careful when you go to worship. Incidentally, the NLT reads 5:1a "As you enter the house of God, keep your ears open and your mouth shut." That maybe good advice, but I don't think it is really an accurate translation. However, I like the heading the NLT gives this passage: "Approaching God with Care," because there is kind of flashing, warning light here. Worship is serious business. We must not take it lightly.

But, we sometimes don't that. Maybe we walk into this room on Sunday morning and breathe a sigh of relief that no one is sitting in our seat. Then we sit down and watch what everyone around us is doing. We maybe silently grumble if the worship music is too loud or if the Pastor's sermon is too long. When the service ends, we say hello to a couple of our friends and go home. Solomon says, don't do that! As you go to a place of corporate worship be ready. Be alert! You can relax later. Pay attention, NOW!

Solomon then gives some important instructions for worship that can be summed up in 3 commands.

#1.) LISTEN WELL, so you hear what God is saying.

Eccl. 5:1b-3 "Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong. 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 care, and many words mark the speech of a fool."

Now, it is important to express our praise to God when we gather to worship. Sing songs of praise from our hearts, with our lips, pleases God. It should be a delight for us to sing as we did this morning. The psalms tell us to sing and shout to the Lord, and some of us maybe should be a bit more expressive as we do that. Solomon, however, reminds us that perhaps more important when we are worshipping is to listen. Yes, we should express our praise and our petitions to the Lord. Yet, unless we take time to listen to the voice of God, our praise will often be empty and

our petitions will tend to be rooted in selfishness rather than honoring the Lord.

So what does it mean for us to listen for God? 2 things. 1st we need to take time to meditate on the Lord and His truth. We can do this before, during and after worship service. Now, Siri, with a little help from me, plans our worship service. She tried to make sure there is time for meditation and reflection during these worship times. The before and after parts are your responsibility, however. There are a variety of things you can do at home before you come to church and after you get back home that will help you hear God speak. But, I want to say a few words about what happens in this room, before and after the worship service. One of the great things about this church is that we like each other. We are glad to see each other on Sunday mornings and we enjoy visiting with each other. That is a very good thing. You should never feel like you are going to a funeral when you walk into this room on Sunday morning. Yet, we need to remember that visiting with friends is not as important as meeting with God, and maybe we should be a lot more intentional about that. For example, this is an ordinary room, but I think we don't want to treat it as a sacred space when we gather on Sunday mornings. If someone wants to quietly meditate on God's truth or pray before or after the service, that is wonderful. And the rest of us should be considerate of those trying to do that. Meditation and prayer are always appropriate here. Yes, this should be a happy room to be in, but we also want it to be a holy room, where people truly listen to the Lord.

2nd We need to listen closely to the sermon if we want to hear the Lord speak to us. Now, of course, God also speaks through the worship songs or in any way He chooses. Yet, the primary way He speaks to us is through His word, the Bible. The Sunday morning sermon is one important way to hear that Word. Almost every Sunday my goal is to tell you what a particular Bible passage says, help you understand what it means, and to give you some thoughts about how we should respond to and apply that Word. If you want to listen to God, you should listen closely when God's Word is taught. And remember, even if the sermon doesn't seem really interesting, even if the preacher is not very dynamic or articulate, even if you don't agree with everything that is said, as long as the preacher is proclaiming God's Word, the Lord can use that sermon to speak to you. A

good sermon is really any one that the Lord uses to accomplish His purpose.

However, a sermon who God speaks through usually has 2 ingredients. #1) I, or any preacher, must proclaim clearly what God says in His Word, the Bible. And #2.) You, folks, must be listening. Listening attentively, listening closely. Now, I know that is not always easy. One fellow I know says he decided God was calling Him to be a pastor because he didn't like listening to other people's sermons.

By January of 2027, the plan, if the Lord wills, is for me to spend less time up here preaching sermons and more time with you listening to them. I already know it can be harder for me to listen to a sermon than to preach one. But it is important for me and for you to be able to listen to God's Word being preached. I know some of you find taking notes helps you be a better listener. That's one of the reasons there is always an outline in the bulletin, to help you do that. Some find sitting in these rows near the front makes listening easier.

I don't have the answer, but I do know that listening closely to the sermon is important because the Lord is often speaking to us through it. That fact, has little to do with me or any preacher, but it has everything to do with this book, the Bible, God's Word. When we are in this room on Sunday mornings, it is important we listen well, so we hear what God is saying.

#2.) Solomon says, when we worship we should be careful that we don't make hasty promises to God. Eccl. 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?"

In other words, if we tell the Lord we would do something, we better do it. It is better to not make any promises to God, than to make promises we don't really intend to keep. Solomon warns, we should never try to make excuses to the Lord, such as claiming we made a mistake when we made a particular vow. The Lord expects us to keep our word. Now, what are some of the promises we make? One would be marriage vows. 40+ years ago when I told Nancy I would be faithful to her until death do us part, that was not just a promise I made to her, but also a promise I made before

God. When we dedicate our children to the Lord, as many of you have done, we make promises to God. We are pledging to seek to raise our sons and daughters in a way that pleases the Lord. When we get baptized, as some of you will do this afternoon, one of the things we are doing is promising we will seek to follow Jesus the rest of our lives.

Those of us who are official members of this church have made some promise to God, spelled out the church covenant where we pledge to be faithful members of CBC. If someone agrees to teach a Sunday school class or work in the Wednesday night Club program, that is an implied promise to God, because we ask people to do those things only if they believe God is calling them to do so. Now, that doesn't mean anyone should say, "OK, I am going to play it safe. I will not make any promise or commitments at all. I will just do whatever I want to do, when I want to do it." That friend, is a rather selfish attitude and for a number of reasons is not pleasing to God at all. The point of our text, however, is that you need to take your word very seriously, because God does.

Another way we often make bows at church is when we sing. Some of the songs and hymns we sing include lyrics that are promises to the Lord,. For example, an old hymn says "Take my life and let it be consecrated Lord to Thee." There is an implied promise there but one verse of that song says "Take my silver and my gold, not a mite, not a penny would I withhold." A friend of mine used to just hum along when it came to that verse because he didn't want to make that promise. It is probably good he didn't not sing those words.

This afternoon we might sing the song, "I have decided to follow Jesus." Each verse ends with the phrase "No turning back, no turning back." That is a promise we are making to God. One verse of the songs says, "Though none go with me, still I will follow, no turning back." That is a promise. It is not one that is easy to follow, but it is a promise to God, a promise that needs to be taken seriously. All of our promises to God should be taken seriously.

#3.) When we worship we must focus our mind and heart on the Lord. Eccl. 5:7 Much dreaming and many words are meaningless. Therefore fear God. Other verses say, "Stand in awe of God," Bible commentaries say that the dreaming of who Solomon speaks is day dreaming or as one put it, "Mental Doodling." I know it can be very easy to do that, doodling our way through a worship

service, as we let our day dreams take us from one setting to another.

Yesterday's time at the lake, tomorrow's project at the office, the decision whether to fix the old washing machine or buy a new one, questions about how to deal with a problem with one of the kids, wondering who will be going to lunch at Snickers today. That type of mental doodling can occur when we sit in this room on Sunday morning. When that is happening, we are probably not worshipping.

I remember one fellow, many years ago, who came to church almost every Sunday morning and Sunday evening, but would often bring a notebook, sit in the back and work on projects for his job. Now, maybe he was a great multitasker and was able to focus on both the Lord and his project. But I sometimes wondered if he felt as long as he was in the building on Sunday, God was pleased, no matter where his focus was. These days if you use an E-Bible on your phone, you can look at other things on your phone during the sermon and no one will know, no one except God. When we worship our focus should be on the Lord. We must not think that just going through the motions of Sunday morning church is worship. A Barna Survey says most Americans view worship as doing the routine things, in the proper place, at the usual time. Worship is often seen as a series of actions rather than an encounter with God.

We fall into verbal doodling, as well as mental doodling. But mumbling the words, to "How Great Thou Art" as you look for where a friend is sitting is not worship. Saying a prayer in not worship if we are not thinking about the words of the prayer. Putting a check, even a large check, in the offering box, is not worship unless it is done with a heart full of gratitude to the Lord.

Genuine worship involves meeting with the Lord. And when that happens, there will be a sense of awe in our hearts. Friends, when we walk into this room on Sunday morning, our thoughts should go beyond the horizontal level, beyond the people that are here. Instead we should focus the attention of our minds and the affections of our hearts on the Lord. We should think about His greatness and goodness. We should ponder His glory and grace. And as Solomon says, we should be in awe before Him.

Sometimes like Isaiah we will silently fall down on our knees before the Lord who is Holy, Holy, Holy. Other times we will sing with great exuberance because through our faith in Jesus as savior and

Lord, we like Isaiah, have experience the marvel of God's grace, forgiveness and cleansing.

At this point, I want to say something that I maybe should have made clear earlier. It is impossible to worship God in the right way, in a way that pleases Him, if you are not a believer in Jesus Christ. To deny that Jesus is the eternal son of God and to reject the Salvation freely offered through Him, is a terrible insult to the Lord. Giving God words of praise when we refuse to receive His salvation is empty talk. To be a true worshiper of God means we need to embrace Jesus as Savior and Lord. And if you are not doing that, we need to talk, soon.

Now, friends, we won't all express our worship in the same way. Some people will close their eyes and others will keep them open. Some will sing with great gusto while others will, at times, simply listen to the rest of the congregation. Some will raise their hands, and others will keep those hands planted firmly by their sides. You may worship different ways at different times. But when by God's grace you truly focus your mind and heart on the Lord, you are a genuine worshiper. And friend, never be content to be anything less.

Folks, on Sunday, August 8th, 1993, I preached my 1st sermon as pastor of this church. That is 32 years ago. The title of that message was "Be Serious about God." The theme was what I believe is a key to life. We need to take ourselves less seriously and take God more seriously. 32 years later, the message is still the same.

I am convinced it is very health not to take ourselves quite as seriously as we often do. It is good to be able to laugh at ourselves. But friends, we need to take God seriously. And maybe it is especially important that we be serious about our worship of the Lord.

The Bible warns that those who take worship lightly can end up in big trouble. In Numbers 16, the Lord strikes Korah and 250 of his friends dead, because they offer sacrifices that are not pleasing to him. In 1 Cor. 11, the N. T., the apostle Paul says that some of the Corinthians have become sick and a few have even dies, because they didn't take the observance of the Lords' Supper seriously.

Now, I am not saying that if you come to church and do some mental or verbal doodling the Lord is going to strike you dead. That will probably NOT HAPPEN. But I do know that if you come to church on Sunday morning, fail to take worship seriously, fail to really meet the Lord, fail to hear

His voice, you have missed out on one of the greatest opportunities and blessings of life.

And friends, I don't want that to happen to you or to me. May the Lord help us grow as genuine worshippers who will always worship with care, because we know the Lord is indeed worthy of our worship.