

Vapor in Worship

Westview Church | Ecclesiastes 5:1-7 | Pastor Brett Toney | November 2, 2025

Prepare for Worship

How much thought do you give to prepare for worship? I don't mean just the worship service we gather for each Sunday. Your private worship—is it characterized by a haphazard, hurried scrambling to open to a chapter of the Bible? Or your family worship—“Bah! Kids! Quick! Let's pray before bed!” And yes, as we gather for public worship—are Sundays commonly frantic, finding clothes and breakfast and children as you rush out of the house? Approaching the Lord thoughtlessly tills the soil for a harvest of vain worship. This is what wise Solomon is trying to keep us from in Ecclesiastes 5:1-7. He is telling us to fear God when you draw near to worship, lest our worship succumb to the vapor of life under the sun. Solomon is reflecting on his life and experiences. As he looks back across all of his pleasures and work, the injustices and oppressions, the futility of envy, loneliness, and fame—he sees that not even worship is free from *hebel*, from being fleeting and empty like vapor. We think, “Maybe if I were just more spiritual, then the futility and frustrations of life would resolve!” Yet what we find is that we even make the worship of God about *us*—*my* sacrifices, *my* dreams, *my* vows, *my* words. We should rather obey and fear God. Solomon makes this point, as one author noted, by directing us to listen to God and speak to God.¹

Listen to God (Ecclesiastes 5:1-3)

So, look with me at v.1-3 and the exhortation to listen to God. Solomon begins with the warning, “Guard your steps!” How you walk, the path you're on, where you step—they are common biblical images for your conduct and manner of life. We ought to be on guard, especially as we draw near to God to worship. This was the special duty of the tribe of Levi. In Numbers 3, God set them apart to guard the worship of God. Even though God dwelt in the

midst of his people in the tabernacle, he is nevertheless holy. To come before him carelessly or inappropriately is to profane him, to make him common. It is to engage with him contrary to his character.

And it seems that the flow of thought from the first four chapters of Ecclesiastes and into chapter five here is an effort to find resolution to all the futility Solomon has described. He has led us down into the fog—all avenues of pleasure are corrupted, all we set ourselves to do is frustrated, death is pervasive and unavoidable, injustice and oppression abound. And on the brink of despair, we clamor about for purpose and meaning and significance and deliverance. So, we rush to worship, to the house of God, to take matters into our own hands. We don't guard our steps, our conduct, but regard him contrary to his holiness. "God, where are you! God, answer me! God, here—have this sacrifice. Maybe you need to be persuaded to act on my behalf. God, you must not know what you're doing. You also must not know the beginning to the end because none of this suffering makes sense. God, let me tell you how life is supposed to go. God, are you listening!?" Verse 2, "Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God." You walk in folly when you rush ahead with many words.

Conducting yourself in that way is no pleasing sacrifice to the LORD. Rather, it is like the "sacrifice of fools," v.1. The biblical idea of a fool is not just of someone who stumbles upon bad decisions. A fool is one who willfully rejects God's ways to his own demise. The caution of our words in v.2 elaborates on this imagery of the "sacrifice of fools." Fools come in to the house of God to go through the motions—just do the thing. But tragically, "they do not know that they are doing evil." That's what it is like when you do not "let your words be few." You think you're praying or finding answers, but your presumptions are evil. And you're so caught up in the hastiness of your heart that you don't even know it. It's like kids rushing to mom or you into

your manager's office, rattling off all of the ways you've been wronged. But you're actually slandering your sister or your colleague, and you don't even know it.

Solomon's wise correction is listen to God—"To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools" (v.1). This is underscored by the proverb of v.3, "For a dream comes with much business [or as another translation captures it, 'through much effort'], and a fool's voice with many words." The problem is overproduction. You can bring a dream to fruition through much toil. Likewise, many words confirm your voice is that of a fool. Instead, listen to God. This certainly would incline us to humble ourselves to pay attention to God's Word. That is where he has most clearly and authoritatively spoken. We ought to meditate on his Word. But merely listening to Scripture is not what Solomon is talking about. We can "hear" without "listening." He wants us to "guard [our] steps," to reform our conduct. Listening leads to repenting. If we hear from God but keep trying to shepherd the wind, we're not listening.

That's why the central confession of the Old Testament begins, "*Hear, O Israel!*" "Listen! Let what follows change you. Reorient your life around what you're about to hear!" And what is it that God's people were to hear, to be the north star of their lives? "The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). Hold the LORD supreme in all your affections and priorities. Orient yourself rightly in reference to his supremacy. When you follow the Lord in such faith-filled obedience in all of life, you "guard your steps," you "draw near to listen." If you will walk wisely in a world of vapor, it will not be by spewing many words or telling God what he needs to do. Rather, it will be honoring God as God, the Holy One in your midst. So when you draw near to worship, whether in private, with your family, or together with the church, listen to God. Know that you draw near the Holy of Holies. Slow your mouth and

humble yourself. After all, as one pastor wrote, “Grace runs downhill.”² God gives grace to the humble.

Speak to God (Ecclesiastes 5:4-7)

When you have slowed your heart and your mouth, honoring God as God, walking by faith and obedience to him, then comes a time to speak to God—v.4-7. Yet even in speaking to God, don’t be hasty but mindful. Don’t look on all the injustice and oppression and vain worship in our world and say something like, “God, I will end racism. I will vindicate the pre-born. I will sell all that I have and serve the poor.” Don’t write a check you can’t cash. God has no pleasure in such folly. The folly isn’t in the aspiration but the activity. You are not God in Heaven; you are a mortal on earth. Are you able to “pay what you vow”? Solomon says, “It is better that you should *not* vow than that you should vow and *not* pay,” v.5. There’s no requirement on God’s people to vow to God. Yet we can feel so self-righteous to vow grand things to God.

Think of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5. They sold property and gave the proceeds to the Church, yet they kept some back for themselves. They put on airs that they had done his grand gesture, but they lied to the Holy Spirit. They didn’t have to vow such a thing. Nothing compelled them. And it cost them their lives. Solomon says in v.6 that your mouth can lead you into sin, and making a rash vow won’t be washed away when called to account by a simple, “My bad! JK!” That is not how you regard God according to his holiness. You provoke him to anger and judgment when you do that. Here’s a personal example. In high school, I went to a big youth conference where there was a big, culminating call to commit to singleness for a year. It was a good intentioned commitment to be single-mindedly devoted to the Lord for a year at a formative time of life. I made that commitment, but ten months in started to like a girl. I went back on my commitment, my vow. The relationship ended up causing all kinds of pain and

heartache. Sometimes the anger and judgment of God looks like God giving you over to your sin and the natural consequences of it, Romans 1:24.

And it's avoidable. If you speak to God a vow, pay it. But if you don't think you can, don't say it. Verse 7, "When dreams increase and words grow many, there is vanity." You contribute to the futility and vapor of life by foolishly vowing, dreaming up ways you'll do great things that you are powerless to fulfill. It reveals you are thinking more highly of yourself than you ought. And that you think less of God than he is. So instead, fear God. That is far more important than impressive vows. God is not worshiped, he is not revered, by unkept vows. But when you're governed by the fear of the Lord, you walk wisely and honorably before him. It shows you don't regard him lightly. Kids, think of it this way. If your dad tells you, "Clean your room, or there will be consequences." You could say, "Yes, father! Right away!" and run upstairs and read in your room. Yet you never clean your room. Or, you could say, "Ok." And quietly walk upstairs and clean. What honors your dad more? The second one. Boldly speaking what you will do while ignoring the threat of consequences—you lie to your dad to his face and make him to be liar. You're saying, "I'm not going to do what I said, and I don't believe you will either." The other honors him because you have a right fear of him, that he will give consequences like he said. And that trust or faith in his word, leads you to obey what he asks of you. This is how we approach God, whether on our own or here together. We honor him by trusting his Word, that he will be "angry at your voice and destroy the work of your hands" if we do not fear him and speak foolishly to him.

The Table

We listen to God and speak to God as we come to the Table. But, Church, there is a tension here. We come to the Lord's Table. He has prepared before us a table in the presence of

our enemies (cf. Psalm 23:5). He welcomes us to commune with him. There is familiarity and intimacy in divine hospitality. And we must fear God. Don't be rash with your mouth or vow things you ought not to. Guard your steps. Even our worship, even our participation at the Table can be tainted by the curse of futility. We can eat and drink here in an unworthy manner and by doing so eat and drink judgment upon ourselves (1 Corinthians 11:29). This tension at the Table of God's immanence and God's transcendence reminds us that even here, we need the grace of Christ. We mock God with our posturing and many words and vain promises. We presume upon his mercy as we come before his holy presence thoughtlessly. We need the fear of God. God is in heaven, and we are on earth. And it is this Table that declares to us that the only way a sinner like me can draw near the Holy One is through faith in Christ. O, that we would listen to God and speak to God from that position of faith and obedience and fear of him.

¹This simple, two-point structure is from Gibson, *Living Life Backwards* (Crossway)

²C. John Miller, *The Heart of a Servant Leader* (P&R, 2004), 65.