

Ecclesiastes 5:1–7 (CSB)

CAUTION IN GOD'S PRESENCE

5 Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Better to approach in obedience than to offer the sacrifice as fools do, for they ignorantly do wrong. **2** Do not be hasty to speak, and do not be impulsive to make a speech before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few. **3** Just as dreams accompany much labor, so also a fool's voice comes with many words. **4** When you make a vow to God, don't delay fulfilling it, because he does not delight in fools. Fulfill what you vow. **5** Better that you do not vow than that you vow and not fulfill it. **6** Do not let your mouth bring guilt on you, and do not say in the presence of the messenger that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry with your words and destroy the work of your hands? **7** For many dreams bring futility; so do many words. Therefore, fear God.

Ecclesiastes 5:1–7 (NLT)

Approaching God with Care

¹ As you enter the house of God, keep your ears open and your mouth shut. It is evil to make mindless offerings to God. ² Don't make rash promises, and don't be hasty in bringing matters before God. After all, God is in heaven, and you are here on earth. So let your words be few.

³ Too much activity gives you restless dreams; too many words make you a fool.

⁴ When you make a promise to God, don't delay in following through, for God takes no pleasure in fools. Keep all the promises you make to him. ⁵ It is better to say nothing than to make a promise and not keep it. ⁶ Don't let your mouth make you sin. And don't defend yourself by telling the Temple messenger that the promise you made was a mistake. That would make God angry, and he might wipe out everything you have achieved.

⁷ Talk is cheap, like daydreams and other useless activities. Fear God instead.

I have gone to church my whole life.

A. I think that's a good thing.

1. Many of you were raised that way.
2. And a lot of your kids are being raised that way, too.

B. We have all gone to church not because we wanted to, but because we felt obligated.

1. Even this morning, maybe you are here more out of obligation than excitement.
2. Your spouse forced you
3. Your parent forced you
4. Your conscience guilted you.
5. Now, here you are, about halfway through the service, waiting for me to give you a reason to check out and give up.

C. We have all been there.

1. You showed up, but you aren't really here.
2. Or you are here, but you are angry, sad, scared, or exhausted.

D. Some people become a totally different person at church time.

1. They might have been terrible people all week.
2. But at church, they are bubbly, spiritual, and holy all of a sudden.
3. The Greeks gave a word for this: Hypocrite.

E. Here's the thing: we all need God at the center of our lives.

1. When we feel like it, and when we don't.
2. The hypocrite needs Jesus and so do the really honest people who will confess that they have nothing good in them.

F. Solomon's words about worship are honest.

1. Here is an old guy who has explored everything the world has to offer, and his advice here is kind of cynical.
2. He gets some things right, and other things, he is missing the most important part.

G. I'm not sure what brings you to church this morning.

1. But I'm proud of you for being here!
2. I want to share some wisdom that will challenge all of us about what it means to worship.
3. Let's start with what Solomon gets right.

What Solomon gets Right about Worship

A. Worshipping God is a privilege.

1. It is incredibly easy to treat access to God as nothing special.
2. Familiarity breeds contempt.

Did you know that in the 17th-18th century New England, lobster was poor people's food?

People would hide their lobster shells out of sight because it was a sign you were either poor or enslaved.

Why? Because it was so plentiful.

We value what is rare, novel, and limited.

3. Solomon is right in warning God's people to guard their steps going to God's house.
 - a. It's a privilege to worship.
 - b. It's a privilege to have access to God.
 - c. And with privilege comes responsibility.
4. I know this can go too far.
 - a. God doesn't require us to wear long sleeves and suits, or dresses and skirts.
 - b. Worship is not merely a matter of the heart; it is also a matter of conduct.¹

That leads us to the second thing he gets right:

B. The Fear of God matters.

¹ Knut Martin Heim, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary: Commentary*, ed. David G. Firth, vol. 18, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 2019), 90.

1. Solomon talks about the Fear of God.
2. This kind of fear is not a fear of punishment but reverence and respect.
3. Worship without reverence isn't worship.
4. And God looks at our hearts.
5. We can have the outside right, but if our inside world is rebellious, hateful, and full of all manners and types of sin, then we aren't fearing God.

C. We don't have to twist God's arm.

1. Solomon talks about impulsive speech, lots of words, and wrong sacrifices.
2. Can I give you some good news?

You don't have to earn God's love.

You don't have to twist God's arm to get his attention.

You already have God's attention.

3. When we pray, when we give, when we come to Church, we do it not to earn God's love but because we already have God's love.

a. It's like going to your grandparents' house.

b. You don't go in hope they will love you, but because they already love you.

4. There isn't anything we can give to God to make him love us more.

a. Romans says, While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

b. Quote: God is already favourably disposed towards their desires; there is no need for extravagant promises in the form of oaths to motivate divine reward²

What Solomon gets wrong.

Where is God?

A. Solomon questions God's involvement, but never his existence.

1. Solomon knows God exists.

² Knut Martin Heim, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary: Commentary*, ed. David G. Firth, vol. 18, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 2019), 90.

2. No doubt, because he met him twice.

3. But Solomon seems to question God's involvement in men's lives.

B. But notice this:

1. Solomon has no doubt that God pays attention when a person goes to the house of God and makes a promise to God.

2. Notice where Solomon places God.

3. In heaven, and not on Earth, and not in the Temple.

4. That's strange for a man who had experienced God and heard God say He would inhabit the Temple.

C. In Heaven and on Earth.

1. Jesus taught us to pray, "Father who art in Heaven..."

2. We also know that one of the titles given to Jesus is "Immanuel, God with us."

3. But God isn't as distant as Solomon thinks he is.

D. My favorite thing about Judaism and Christianity is that God constantly closes the gap between Himself and humanity.

1. He walked in the Garden before the Fall.

2. He made the first sacrifice to clothe them.

3. God chose Abraham, Abraham didn't choose God.

4. God rescued Isaac, and Lot, and Jacob.

5. God delivered Israel from Egypt and His presence went through the wilderness the whole time.

6. God went into the fiery furnace of the 3 Hebrew Children.

7. God shut the mouths of the lions when Daniel spent a night there.

8. And the greatest of all, Jesus came to die.

9. We didn't beg Him, bribe Him, or deserve Him.

Is God Mad?

A. The God of Solomon, at least in this chapter, is an angry God.

1. He's like the old man who sits on his porch making sure nobody's dog poops in the ditch on his side of the street.
2. He's like the younger guy who puts cameras on the fencepost outside the county road and wonders why people are driving in front of his house.

B. Solomon is warning others.

1. But his warnings are kind of strange.
2. In Solomon's day, going to the Temple wasn't optional.
 - a. But when you go, don't talk.
 - b. Don't say anything.
 - c. Don't make any promises.
 - d. Don't sacrifice too much.
3. What he really means is, don't pray and don't make any promises you won't keep.
 - a. Because to make a vow and not keep it was not only a sin, but Deuteronomy called it an intentional sin, and there is no coming back from that.
 - b. Solomon is warning his people, "anything you say can and will be held against you."
 - c. So if Solomon was an American lawyer, his advice is "plead the fifth."

C. But that misses the real issue.

1. The goal isn't to avoid all sacrifice, it's to make the right sacrifice.
2. The goal isn't to avoid all prayer, but to pray purposefully and meaningfully
3. The goal isn't to avoid God's anger; it is to embrace God's love.
4. Solomon's view of God is incomplete.

D. Solomon sounds like a guy with a lot of wisdom and knowledge, but has no relationship.

1. This might not be fair.

2. And maybe Solomon has better motives than I'm giving him credit for.
3. But His wisdom about worship here feels empty.

How do we avoid an empty or cynical relationship with God?

A. Guard your heart.

1. One of my favorite prayers comes from Psalms 19:14

Psalm 19:14 (CSB)

¹⁴May the words of my mouth
and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable to you,
LORD, my rock and my Redeemer.

2. I pray this because:

- a. Sometimes, my attitude is terrible.
- b. Sometimes, I've said things that I meant but shouldn't have said.
- c. Sometimes, I'm good with having the right words but my heart isn't present.

3. My emotions and my meditation are two things I can control.

- a. To have a bad thought or the beginning of a bad attitude isn't sin. (Temptation)
- b. To nurture those thoughts and attitudes or to act on them is.
- c. Keeping myself in check is one way I can help avoid a cynical relationship.

B. Remain grateful.

1. When I'm not grateful for something, I take it for granted.
2. When I take something for granted, I don't value what is.
3. When I take God for granted, I won't worship Him.
4. He becomes like the lobster years ago:

- a. Give that junk to the poor people.
- b. Not realizing how delicious and decadent it really is.

C. Fear God.

- 1. To say that another way: Take your relationship with Jesus seriously.
- 2. If I'm serious about following Jesus, then I am walking in the Fear of the Lord.
- 3. The things I'm serious about, I respect and honor.
- 4. God isn't asking me to be afraid of Him, but He does require me to fear him.

D. Cultivate thin places.

- 1. In my study, I came across a description I had never heard of.
- 2. Thin places are those places where we feel closest to God.
- 3. Holy places, reverent places, powerful places.
- 4. Solomon had experienced that early on, in 2 Chron. 6. When God came down in fire and cloud.
- 5. It seems that he peaked there.
- 6. Here is something we know that Solomon didn't:
 - a. God wants to be with us.
 - b. In fact, the Holy Spirit lives in every believer.
 - c. Because of Jesus, the space between God and us isn't this monstrous gap.
- 7. The gap that was between us has been bridged by Jesus, and now all of us can approach God.
 - a. You don't need a priest.
 - b. You don't need fancy prayers.

Apply: Where do I go from here?

A. Solomon said, "Guard your steps when you go to the house of God."

- 1. Seems like the first step you have already made.

2. You came to church and to God's house.

B. The next step for you might be:

1. To pray for the first time in a long time.
2. Confess sin that you've been hanging on to.
3. To rededicate your life to Jesus.
4. Take your relationship with God seriously.
5. To make room in your life so you can hear God's voice.

Prayer.