

# WHAT'S THE POINT?

*the gospel according to Ecclesiastes*

## *“Be Silent and Fear God”*

This morning we come to a very sobering text in Ecclesiastes. What brought you into this place this morning? Did you come here this morning out of a desire to feel good about yourself – that you made it to church Sunday so you can check it off your list? Are you here because you crave the affirmation of others, and you wouldn't want them to say you're not spiritual? Are you here because you're trying to prove something? What brought you here to this place this morning? Did you come out of a pure desire to worship?

Our worship can be fueled by so many false desires that we have to continually stop and question the motives of our worship. We must continually fix our eyes on Christ so that we might know what true worship looks like and how it ought to be done. Scripture gives us examples of how the saints before us responded when they stood in the presence of God. They were struck with a holy fear and reverence. They hid their faces and bit the dust. They could not speak for they were at a loss for words. All they could do, was worship.

Worship – we were created for it. If it is our life-purpose, then we should be greatly concerned with how we do it.

The text this morning is Ecclesiastes 5:1-7.

Why do we find a passage like this here in the beginning of Chapter 5? Up to this point, Solomon has been observing the world and creation. Everything is vanity under the sun. Look at his arguments for creation, wisdom, pleasure, labor, time and life? They are all meaningless. He seems to be studying the world around him and makes note of all the hopelessness under the sun. But now, in Chapter 5, he moves away from observing the world, to preaching against an unholy worship of God. Note the change, this passage is no longer in first person. It has suddenly changed to second person and is aimed at *you* – God's people. The switch from first person and tone of this text emphasizes the importance of which it plays in the whole book.<sup>1</sup>

What is the preacher telling his readers? The outcome of his study done in the last four chapters should drive us to worship the Creator, but not just to worship in any way. We should be mindful to worship the Creator the correct way. In studying this text today, Solomon warns us of false worship. When we worship God we must worship with:

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas Sean O'Donnell, *Ecclesiastes: Reformed Expository Commentary* (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Company, 2014), 112. “Solomon emphasizes this approachability by changing from his “reflective ‘journaling’ style” to sermonizing. That is, he moves from first-person observations (e.g., “I saw,” “I considered”) to second-person imperatives (“you” – e.g., “[you] pay what you vow,” and “you must fear”). This is the first time in the book that the reader is addressed and admonished. This is Solomon's application of 1:1-4:16, an application similar to the one he gives at the end of the book (12:13-14).

- 1. A Healthy Fear of Approaching His Presence**
- 2. A Quiet and Listening Heart**
- 3. A Reverent Response to His Glory**

### **1. A Healthy Fear of Approaching His Presence**

Our approach to our Creator should be like that of one consumed by fear and awe. It is an interesting dichotomy. “Fear the Lord” yet at the same time we are to “Fear not, because God is with us.” This two fold nature of our worship is to cause us to approach Him with ultimate respect and reverence as the maker and orchestrator of all things.

This past month we had the children’s Training Grounds conference here, and it was so neat to see the kid’s faces when we talked about putting on the armor of God in order to stand up against the schemes of the Devil. During that time, it hit me. What in the world runs through these kids minds when we talk about a spiritual war? Often times, I myself feel like it is a fairytale or something far off in a distant land. But there is need to tell ourselves that this is a real war. We are battling a real enemy! The same could be said about the fear of God. We know we should have it. But what in the world does that look like? This is why we should go back to the examples of Scripture. Have we approached God today with a healthy fear of His Glory – the same way Moses or David did?

Our very lives rest in the palm of His hand. At any moment, if He so desires, we would cease to exist and our name would be remembered no more. He is completely holy, righteous and just and we have offended His glorious name. Man should live in fear of God.

At the same time, if He has found delight in us, then we are cherished, protected, and guarded by His limitless power. Therefore, His children have no need to fear because He is their refuge. Like a loving father here on earth who relates to his children and raises them up in the Lord. His children may fear the father’s discipline when they have miss-behaved, yet they will find great comfort in hiding behind him when facing times of tribulation.

We are to fear God in our approach to His throne. He is utterly. Supremely powerful and holy. We cannot even fathom His greatness. Have you entered the doors of Ventura this morning consumed with a reverent fear and awe for God?

It’s all too easy isn’t it? This whole church thing that we do in America.<sup>2</sup> Thousands upon thousands of people will walk into churches all across America who have absolutely no desire to worship God out of a reverent fear for Him. We come to church and we play our part. We smile although we’re struggling inside. We hug and shake hands with many but truly don’t love everyone we embrace. We pray prayerless

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<sup>2</sup> Douglas Sean O’Donnell, *Ecclesiastes: Reformed Expository Commentary* (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Company, 2014), 107. O’Donnell really draws out the hypocrisy of the church in our day in the various forms of worship, postmodernism, propaganda, and prosperity gospel. His words depict it well, “We live in one of the most sacrilegious and blasphemous church cultures in the history of Christianity.”

prayers.<sup>3</sup> We speak empty words. We worship the god we have made<sup>4</sup> and go home telling ourselves that we have been filled. We say “Praise God for His grace!” Do we see how hypocritical this is? God has strong words against it in Isaiah 1:12-17

*“When you come to appear before me, who has required of you this trampling of my courts? Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations—I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow’s cause.”*

This passage gives us a vivid idea. We are to repent of our sins and hypocrisy and worship the real God of Heaven instead of the god we have created in our minds. It’s a serious matter. Don’t come striding in embracing all of your accomplishments or good works. Come into His presence with holy reverence.

*Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands you sinners and purify your hearts you double minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord so that He may exalt you.  
– James 4:8-10*

This isn’t just any god. This is the God Who created Heaven and Earth. Do we know Who it is we have approached this morning?

*Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; His understanding is unsearchable.  
– Isaiah 40:28*

*Oh the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgements and how inscrutable His ways! “For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been His counselor? Or who has given a gift to Him that he might be repaid?” For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be glory forever. Amen. – Romans 11:33-36*

Truly we are desperate for His grace. Can any of us say, “I have approached God this morning with a reverent fear of Him and a holy awe of His name?” Only One has approached God in such a way. Only One

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<sup>3</sup> Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 123. This whole thought was taken from Ryken’s comments on the church’s authenticity in its worship. He comments, “Do we really mean what we say when we stand and worship in the house of God? It is easy to read a psalm or sing a hymn or confess a creed without ever thinking about what it means. Sometimes even a prayer can be prayerless! Simply repeating pious words does not mean that our words come from a pious heart.” In thinking through Ryken’s observation, I even struggle with singing such hymns as *I Surrender All* or *It Is Well* or even the more contemporary song *Blessed Be the Name* considering that I feel like I am lying. I don’t feel like I can truly say those words and mean them sometimes.

<sup>4</sup> Douglas Sean O’Donnell, *Ecclesiastes: Reformed Expository Commentary* (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Company, 2014), 118. “‘There is no fear of God before their eyes’ (Rom. 3:18), could be the contemporary church’s motto. If it is not found in our actual vision statements, it is found in many worship services every Sunday. We have made glorious Jesus into our own inglorious image and serve him up to accommodate everyone’s personal tastes.”

has ascended the hill of the Lord as described in Psalm 24. Jesus, the perfect Lamb of God, Who experienced the full wrath of God on Calvary. When He died and ascended on high He welcomed us to approach His throne of Grace.

*Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. – Hebrews 4:14-16*

The text says, “Guard your steps when you go to the house of God.” This is a parallel to Exodus 3:5 where God called to Moses from the burning bush. As Moses approached the fire out of awe and curiosity, God spoke and commanded Moses to remove His sandals for he was standing on holy ground. This command should not be taken lightly. During this time period when Solomon was writing this, the house of God would have referred to the temple that Solomon had built. This was the gathering place. This was the place of worship and sacrifice. It was not to be treated as any building, but as a place of solemn worship.

In our day, this would be reflective of the place where we gather for worship. We confess that there is nothing special about the building, but where the people gather to worship. Treat that place as holy ground. You have entered the very presence of the living God.<sup>5</sup>

## **2. A Quiet and Listening Heart**

How are we to “guard our steps”? We approach His throne with quiet and listening hearts over bringing the sacrifice of fools. God desires a heart that is attentive toward Him. A heart of humility and worship. When the assembly of Israel gathered together in the Old Testament, the Torah (Genesis – Deuteronomy) was read before the people. The people were to listen to words of the Lord and obey His commands. That was of primary importance. Not the sacrifices that they made or the gift offerings they brought.

*Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams. – 1 Samuel 15:22*

*But when He heard it, He said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.” – Matthew 9:12-13*

*Thus says the Lord: “Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me, and what is the place of my rest? All these things my hand has made, and so all these things came to be,” declares the Lord. “But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word.” – Isaiah 66:1-2*

Sacrifice born from a heart that does not truly fear God is not only foolishness – it is evil.

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<sup>5</sup> Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 121. “Understand that whenever we go to worship, we enter the presence of a holy God who has gathered his holy people to hear his Holy Word. If we take this for granted, not listening to what God says, then the Bible says that we are guilty of great evil, for we have despised the gospel of the cross and the empty tomb.”

What is this “sacrifice of fools” that the text speaks of? The entire text revolves around this idea of being careful not to make a vow with our mouths or be rash in what we promise God. The idea begins in verse 1 when it says, “To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools...” In this text, the term for making a sacrifice in the temple would be an act of thankfulness and was commonly accompanied by a vow to the Lord.<sup>6</sup> I think an appropriate text to emphasize this would be Psalm 50:14.

*Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and perform your vows to the Most High, - Psalm 50:14*

This concept of vow making was not in any way sinful, but was commonly practiced in the Israelite culture. We see Hannah vowing to give her firstborn male child to the Lord if he would give her a son. That son was Samuel. We also see Jephthah making a rather rash and foolish vow to sacrifice the first thing that came through his gates. It so happened to be his only daughter. Vows only became sinful when the vow maker did not keep the promise that he/she had made.

Interestingly, it seems as though that the idea of a hasty or rash vow may have at times been fueled by a foolish heart seeking the praise of man. After all, it would have been impressive for someone to stand before the altar and vow to give something great for God or to do something impressive before an assembly of listening ears. This seems to be how the vows were made. They would be declared in the house of God, before an assembly, and then would be upheld by the priests. Note in verse 6 that it says “before the messenger”. This messenger would have been a minister who was in charge of collecting the vowed gifts. Was it common practice to make such foolish vows only to gain the applause of men?

How often do we do that? We commit to something or promise something because it lifts us up at the time. Maybe someone near us heard us and it made us feel good, but we fail to really carry it out. In all honesty, it is better for us to let our words be few. To come and listen at the feet of Jesus with a quiet heart. There is so much more that can be learned for a heart seeking to listen to God’s Word as opposed to the fool who wants to speak in place of it. God knows the deepest desires of our hearts and He is delighted in the one who waits on Him.

*The Lord is good to those who wait for Him, to the soul who seeks Him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord. – Lamentations 3:25-26*

There are two aspects of vows that we make – those to others and those to God. If we have committed to do something, especially for those whom we call brother sister, then we should carry it out hastily. Are they not the body of Christ? Do not delay in delivering your promise, but let your “yes” be “yes” and your “no” be “no”. Even to those who are unbelieving, let there be no reason for them to slander you, but be above reproach so that they might glorify God.

On the flip side, if you have made a vow to God, then Solomon admonishes us to pay it all the more. Why incur God’s wrath upon yourself? It would be better to not vow at all than to sin.

Be careful with the hastiness of words or even the abundance of words that we use. We forget that words are powerful. They build up and they tear down. Even when we pray to God, are we just muttering nonsense or are we truly seeking him in prayer? Listen to Jesus’ words in Matthew.

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<sup>6</sup> NET Bible (Biblical Studies Press LLC: 2005). 1202

*And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him. – Matthew 6:7-8*

The unbeliever is not only foolish with his words when he speaks, but is not heard by the Father for his words are evil and spoken in vain. They do not speak from a pure heart, but from a heart of evil.

*The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks. – Luke 6:45*

Yet a believer in Christ can speak and pray from a pure given by Christ. Christ has renewed us and has placed His Spirit within us. Therefore, are we making every effort to make our words count – in prayer, in evangelizing, in church, with family and with friends?

*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts toward God. And whatever you do in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him. – Colossians 3:16-17*

Know this too. A vow was made on our behalf. A vow that would one day take the life of an innocent man, Jesus Christ. A vow that would end with death defeated and the redeemed in Christ risen to glory. A vow that was made good at the cross.

### **3. A Reverent Response to His Glory**

Our response to being in God's presence should be nothing but worship. Fear and silence are often descriptive of the emotions overtaking the saints who have gone before us when they encountered God. Their responses varied, but they all had a reverent worship for God. Here are some examples:

**Exodus 3:6** – And Moses hid his face for he was afraid to look at God

**Exodus 34:8** – And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped

**Job 40:4** – “Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth.

**Isaiah 6:5** – And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”

**1 Chronicles 21:16** – And David lifted his eyes and saw the angel of the Lord standing between earth and heaven, and in his hand a drawn sword stretched out over Jerusalem. Then David and the elders, clothed in sackcloth, fell upon their faces.

Fall down and worship. Fall down and worship the Lord of Hosts. That is the only response we should have.

Ventura, one day we will stand before His throne and every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Don't wait for that day to finally do it. Fall before His throne now. Today. While there is still time. Because if you wait for that day, He will say to you,

*'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'* – Matthew 7:23

And those words will echo in your mind throughout all of eternity. Like that song you can never seem to get out of your mind. No matter what you do, the tune is playing over and over again and you begin singing

the lyrics subconsciously. So in the same way will these words replay over and over and over in your mind forever.

Worship Him today!<sup>7</sup> Approach His throne of grace with fear and trembling and joy and peace. Seek Him whole-heartedly! Come with a humble and contrite heart. Do not be hasty to make a vow to Him, but in your heart cherish the vow He has made with you.

The night before He died, He made another vow. He took bread and broke it and passed the cup for His disciples to drink. This we celebrate today.

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<sup>7</sup> Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 128. "The way to get right with God before we go to worship is very simple. The right way to worship is to be honest with him about our hypocrisy and all other sins and then ask him to forgive us, for Jesus' sake."

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