

The Foolishness of False Worship

Ecclesiastes 5:1-7 *Walk prudently when you go to the house of God; and draw near to hear rather than to give the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they do evil. ² Do not be rash with your mouth, And let not your heart utter anything hastily before God. For God is in heaven, and you on earth; Therefore let your words be few. ³ ¶ For a dream comes through much activity, And a fool's voice is known by his many words. ⁴ ¶ When you make a vow to God, do not delay to pay it; For He has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you have vowed -- ⁵ Better not to vow than to vow and not pay. ⁶ Do not let your mouth cause your flesh to sin, nor say before the messenger of God that it was an error. Why should God be angry at your excuse and destroy the work of your hands? ⁷ ¶ For in the multitude of dreams and many words there is also vanity. But fear God.*

A website called Information Age Prayer is a website that will say your prayers for you. You can type your own prayers in, and for a few dollars, the website's computers will play your prayers at whatever time you want them to. There are Catholic, Protestant, Jewish and Muslim prayers, and you can buy the Lord's Prayer, Hail Marys, the Shema; furthermore, the website tells Muslims that their speakers face Mecca. So, you go to the website, buy your prayers, and have a computer with a text to voice synthesiser say them for you.

I find it hard to imagine religion being more false and phony than that. But the truth is that website isn't far off from how most people treat worship and God. They do not seek to treat God as a living person with likes and dislikes, loves and hates, where some things are appropriate and some things are inappropriate. They treat God more like a coin-operated machine: put in your coin, and the machine should automatically do its thing; so, likewise, put in your prayer or song or some liturgical act, and God (whoever He is) should be satisfied. That is false, and to do so is empty, futile and even dangerous. The text we have read today will show us why.

Solomon has been telling us about the vanity of life without God. He has shown us the emptiness of pleasure without God, knowledge without God, seeking control apart from God, seeking comprehension apart from God, seeking justice and fairness apart from God, seeking prosperity and popularity apart from God. He has shown us how empty those things are without God. He has been showing the atheist or the secularist how his life is like a dandelion on a scale – it makes no difference.

But what if there is a man who is not an out-and-out atheist or secularist, but is not prepared to go all the way to Solomon's conclusion? He accepts there must be a God, but he is not interested in really submitting to God, and knowing God. He wants to dabble somewhat in religion. He pretends at religion, pays it some lip-service. Solomon won't allow it. He won't let you play games with God. You are either going to love and fear Him, or not. Solomon is going to warn you that false religion, seen in false worship, is as empty as all the empty pursuits of the atheist. Solomon wants the person who plays around with religion to know that he is in a worse state than the atheist, because he thinks he is paying his religious dues, when in fact, he is an idolater. He manages to deal with the cries of creation and conscience, but what he is dealing with is a lie. His worship is a deadly game he plays. It is self-deception. It is not biblical religion, which is: fear God.

God wants people to take worship very seriously. He wants His reality to burst upon our consciousness and compel us to respond. He does not want games. Jesus warned that there will be many people on judgement day who thought they were worshipping Him in their lives, but who never knew Him.

The real loser in this game is you, not God. God loves you and does not want your self-deception to rob you of eternal life, and of a life lived in Him. This passage serves as a warning not to let your large verbal output deceive you into thinking that you truly know God and are in a relationship with Him.

We know this passage is about worship because it begins with the words 'when you go to the house of God'. In Solomon's time, that would have been the Temple. In later times it would have been the synagogue, and for us, it is the gathered local church. The idea is: when you go to the place and time of public worship with other professing believers.

Solomon is going to give us two approaches to worshipping God: the foolish approach and the wise approach. Let's begin with Solomon's description of foolish worship.

I. The Foolishness of False Worship: "Sacrifice of Fools"

Ecclesiastes 5:1 *Walk prudently when you go to the house of God; and draw near to hear rather than to give the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they do evil.*

Solomon tells you to do one thing *rather* than the other. Come to worship cautiously, and be ready to hear, rather than give the sacrifice of fools.

What is the sacrifice of fools?

Well, in the Old Testament, an Israelite worshipper would nearly always present a sacrifice, when he went to worship. So here, Solomon uses the word *sacrifice* as another way of saying, worship. Don't give the sacrifice, the offering, the worship of a fool. And, he says, you must be thoughtful about this, because false worshippers don't realise they are worshipping falsely: **for they do not know that they do evil.**

Think of how many people in the Bible thought they were doing God service, but were guilty of false worship. Think of the Pharisees. Think of Cain, who brought his offering and was surprised and angry when it wasn't received. Think of Aaron:

Exodus 32:4-6 *...fashioned it with an engraving tool, and made a molded calf. Then they said, "This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!" ⁵ So when Aaron saw it, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, "Tomorrow is a feast to the LORD." ⁶ Then they rose early on the next day, offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play*

Think of the priests in Malachi's days:

Malachi 1:6 *"A son honors his father, And a servant his master. If then I am the Father, Where is My honor? And if I am a Master, Where is My reverence? Says the LORD of hosts To you priests who despise My name. Yet you say, 'In what way have we despised Your name?'"*

The Bible is littered with people who did not realise that what they were doing had become evil!

Is that true today? Absolutely. Everywhere around us are people who are convinced that what they do is true worship, because they are sincere. They are sure that what they are doing is true worship, because they are using the right names – God, Jesus, Holy Spirit.

Do you realise false worship is not merely getting the identity of God wrong? You can have the name right and still be guilty of false worship. If we deal with God in a way that does not agree with who He is, it is false worship. If we speak to Him in a way that does not accord with who He is, it is false worship. If we treat Him, or feel about Him, or sing to Him in ways which are completely different to what He actually is, then our worship is false.

And that's what this passage describes. We see two ways that a false worshipper deals with God which shows he or she doesn't believe God to be what He really is.

a) Insincere Prayer and Praise

Ecclesiastes 5:2 *Do not be rash with your mouth, And let not your heart utter anything hastily before God.*

For God is in heaven and you on earth; Therefore let your words be few.

Here is description of the sacrifice of fools: being rash with your mouth, being hasty with your mouth, and being verbose with your mouth.

These all refer to the same thing.

To be rash with your mouth is to blurt out what pops into your mind.

To be hasty with your mouth is to be quick to speak, to want to make your voice heard.

To not be few with your words means to be doing more talking than listening.

Words which are rash, hasty and ill-chosen before God are insincere words. How do I know?

Because if you were to be in the presence of a dignitary, like the president of a country, or royalty – you would not be hasty with your words, or impulsive. You would not be chatty and casual. You would think carefully of what to say to this dignitary. If we do not give God the same thing, the reason is that we are not thinking about who He is. If we are not thinking about who He is, and still acting like we are talking to Him, then it means we are insincere. We do not mean what we say.

When one of those telemarketers calls you and begins rattling off their speech, using your name every few words, do you feel like they have tailor-made this speech for you? No, you know that they are reading a piece written by the company, with blank spaces for your name. So immediately, you sense, this person isn't wholly sincere. He isn't really talking to me; he is just rattling off a prepared sales pitch and including my name. But that's what people do to God when they do not think about what they are saying, praising, praying – but keep including His name in their prayers and songs.

What does this look like today?

Well, think about the times we use our words in worship. We use them to pray, we use them to praise God in song or testimony, and we use them to preach the Word.

If we pray prayers that are without any thought, casual, flippancy, as if He doesn't mind what we say as long as we say something at the beginning and something at the end – that is insincere. If we use clichés that we think will stand in for words with meaning, we are insincere. If we sing songs that are meaningless, or sentimental, or shallow, or doctrinally wrong, we are using our mouths rashly, hastily. Far better to sing few songs, which we understand and agree with, than many, whose meaning is vague, and which we are uncertain of, but we sing them anyway.

I could throw Scrabble letters at my wife, and say, “Well, there's a message in there somewhere, and I did direct them at you!” But it would not impress her. If we preach messages that are lacking in study, in doctrinal integrity, in careful preparation, in careful delivery – we can be guilty of speaking rashly, hastily, and falsely.

You see, God is not someone you can flatter. You cannot simply say exaggerated things you don't mean, and hope He is so overwhelmed that He overlooks the fact that you don't mean it, or feel it, or understand it. When you are dealing with someone who knows your heart, then err on the side of saying less. Think about what you are going to pray, or praise or preach before you do it.

The worship of a fool is compared to the coming of a dream. When we are busy with many things, it results in dreams. So, when a person decides to fill the air with many random, spontaneous words, it results in a fool's speech (or prayer, or song, or testimony, or sermon). Dreams come from much business; foolish speeches come from many words.

Question: What does that say about worship techniques which call for people to just come up with things on the spot? Yes, there is a place for spontaneous acts of worship but an insincere, irreverent heart will, out of the treasure of his heart, spontaneously bring forth insincere and irreverent things. And a sincere, reverent heart will, out of the treasure of his heart, spontaneously bring forth reverent

and sincere things.

Foolish worship is insincere, and therefore it is false. It is insincere in its prayer and praise, but there is another way that it is insincere. Foolish worship is insincere in its promises.

b) Insincere Promises

Ecclesiastes 5:4-7 *When you make a vow to God, do not delay to pay it; For He has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you have vowed -- ⁵ Better not to vow than to vow and not pay. ⁶ Do not let your mouth cause your flesh to sin, nor say before the messenger of God that it was an error. Why should God be angry at your excuse and destroy the work of your hands? ⁷ ¶ For in the multitude of dreams and many words there is also vanity.*

Here Solomon turns our attention to the matter of vowing in worship. What was a vow? In the Old Testament we see vows most often had to do with **consecration** or **devotion**.

Vows of consecration- A man could consecrate something to God – a field, a house, even people to God. It was considered a vow. You might remember Hannah vowed to give a child born to her to God.

Vows of devotion – these were vows where people bound themselves to display their love for God with some act of loyalty or service. We think of Jephthah's foolish vow – where he vowed to sacrifice the first thing he saw when coming home from battle.

Vows are not bad things. They are good things. They bind the human heart to acts of consecration or devotion. That's why marriages are sealed with vows. That's why at court cases, people are taking a vow of honesty when testifying. And it is not a bad thing for believers to make strong and binding commitments to God in response to His Word. However, the warning here is against foolish worship. God has no pleasure in fools. What do fools do?

Fools make vows and then delay to pay “*Do not let your mouth cause your flesh to sin, ...do not delay to pay it*”

The idea behind delay is someone who procrastinates and never comes up with the thing or act vowed. It's really disobedience by 'forgetfulness'. You refuse to follow through on your commitment by slow, incremental moves away from your vow. It is letting time do your dirty work for you. Instead of saying, “God, I will not do what I vowed. I refuse to follow through.” you pretend that time will make God forget, or make your vow non-binding or less serious.

Fools make excuses “*nor say before the messenger of God that it was an error*”

Fools tell the messenger of God, which probably means the spiritual leader who officiates at worship, “It was a mistake. I didn't really mean all that. It was an emotional thing on that day. I was swept up in the moment. I didn't really mean it. God knows that.” That is false worship. And it angers God.

Ecclesiastes 5:6 *Why should God be angry at your excuse and destroy the work of your hands?*

God can discipline false worship. Remember Ananias and Saphira? They seemed to dedicate something to the Lord, but they did not actually do so. God disciplined them as a warning to others. Take your commitments seriously.

False worship is not following through on your commitments.

A lot of that happens today. When people become members of a church, they take vows. They make covenants. When someone becomes a member of our church, amongst other things, that person vows to worship the Lord together; to study God's Word and submit his or her life to its authority;

to bear witness to the gospel message and to disciple those who believe; to seek spiritual growth; to guard his or her testimony; to cheerfully contribute to this church as a steward of time, talent and money; to love one another in the various ways Scripture teaches; to place his or her family under the authority and guidance of Scripture; to make the cause of missions at home and abroad a priority concern; to support the church's discipline, doctrine, and its God-ordained leadership; furthermore, to give it a sacred pre-eminence over all institutions of human origin.

A person who makes that covenant does so before God. If someone then chooses to skip worship, to neglect God's Word, to withhold his time, talent and money, to despise the believers, to rebel against the church's discipline, doctrine or leadership – what is he doing? He is refusing to pay what he vowed. It is worship that is false, and it angers God.

When someone comes and dedicates their children to God, what are they doing? They are making a public promise to raise their children for the Lord, in the Lord, to the Lord. If they then turn away, and decide to live for the world – that is false worship. They are refusing to pay.

This is the sacrifice of fools: the rash and impulsive prayer, praise and promises of an insincere, thoughtless worshipper.

God is not automatically pleased with sacrifice. God is not automatically pleased with people showing up to worship.

Why do people perform false worship? What would people present insincere prayer, praise or promises to an all-knowing, holy God?

People perform false worship because they are committed to pleasing themselves.

People perform false worship because it eases their conscience, gratifies their appetites, and inflates their pride

People know they should worship God because of creation and conscience. They know there is Someone greater than them who deserves their admiration, and submission. They know from their conscience they do not honour Him, so false worship becomes the substitute.

They come up with a god, give him a name, even a name from the Bible, and then they proceed to do what pleases them in worshipping their god. When they are finished, they tell themselves that they are good people for being religious, so their conscience should quiet down. They tell themselves that the experience they had during worship was so good it proves they are good people and their god is real. They feel better; they feel like they were close to their god. Finally, they feel better than all those heathens and tax-collectors around who never worship. In short, they feel good. They feel a little more moral, a little more religious, a little more in touch with the divine, a better-rounded person. So who is their worship about? Self.

This, Solomon shows us, is vanity.

Ecclesiastes 5:7 *For in the multitude of dreams and many words there is also vanity.*

Playing around with religion is empty. You deceive yourself, and it will not satisfy your soul, save you, or help you in any significant way.

At the end of this section, and throughout this passage, Solomon has been saying and implying the opposite approach. This is the thing which will honour God, and satisfy your soul. The second approach is

II. The Wisdom of Fearing God in Worship

At the end of verse 7, Solomon summarises the heart of true worship:

Ecclesiastes 5:7 *But fear God.*

What does it mean to 'fear God', is it the opposite of this foolish worship? Well, fearing God means treating God as the supremely powerful, dignified and glorious God that He is. The distance between him and us means we should be awed by Him, and humbled that He has drawn near, wary of offending him, cautious to approach.

Psalm 89:7 *God is greatly to be feared in the assembly of the saints, And to be held in reverence by all those around Him.*

Hebrews 12:28 *Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. ²⁹ For our God is a consuming fire.*

How is fearing God the opposite of what has been described here? We see four things which make up this kind of wise worship.

I. Cautiously Approaching

Ecclesiastes 5:1 *Walk prudently when you go to the house of God;*

“Walk prudently”, or as some translations put it, “Guard your steps”. In other words, be careful. Come thoughtfully, reflectively. Why would the Bible tell us to be careful? Because the One we are approaching is not to be trifled with. He is not to be toyed with. We are not coming to be entertained. We are to come with careful thought, as if we are in danger if we do not.

Exodus 3:5 *Then He said, "Do not draw near this place. Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground."*

Let me ask you a question; is it wrong to be scared of God?

Modern Western Christianity tells you it is wrong to be scared of God, because God is love, God is our Friend. God calls us His friends, but quite frankly, I don't know how you can do an honest reading of the Bible and come away with the idea that God's people are never to be scared of His might. Just interview the people at the bottom of Mount Sinai, or Daniel, or Ezekiel, or Isaiah, or John. It's one thing to say that God approaches us and draws near and calms our fears. It's entirely another thing to say that there is nothing about God that can make us scared.

We need to have some concept that it is He whom we are coming to honour. That means I think about the Lord's Day in advance. I prepare myself mentally for an encounter with God. I want to think about what I pray and praise and hear. I give some attention to how I dress, because I am not appearing before Bob the waiter at Milky Lane, I am appearing before God. It means I am gripped by a sense of seriousness. I am expectant of great joy, but I am not flippant, or silly.

II. Coming to Hear

"and draw near to hear rather than to give the sacrifice of fools,"

Fearing God means coming with the determination to do more learning and listening than anything else. Be more ready to hear. When you come to worship, your desire should be for God to do most of the talking and less of the listening, and for you to do most of the listening and less of the talking. Unfortunately, the order often gets reversed.

A teachable heart: I have more to learn, than I have to say in front of God or others.

Think about it. Between God's voice speaking perfectly in the Word, and our voices imperfectly praying, praising or promising, which one should get more of our time? God's voice. That is why

we give the majority of our service to the proclamation of the Word. When we say – I will pray and praise for a while, but I am more ready to sit and hear the Word of God – this is true worship, and it pleases God.

James 1:19 *So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath;*

Did you ever think that God has given us a sign of His desire for us to do more listening than talking? He gave us two ears and one mouth. Have a desire to halve your verbal input and double your auditory input.

Linked to coming to hear is the third way of fearing God in worship:

III. Conserving our Words

Ecclesiastes 5:2 *For God is in heaven, and you on earth; Therefore let your words be few.*

What does the writer expect us to feel when saying “God is in heaven, you are on earth?” There is a vast distance and a vast difference between us. We should be gripped by awe. A wondering silence is more glorifying to God than a nervous jabbering, or worse, a flippant jabbering. We are expected to sense that the majesty of God should fill us with awed silence, and we should choose our words carefully.

Isaiah 55:9 *"For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways, And My thoughts than your thoughts.*

Habakkuk 2:20 *But the LORD is in His holy temple. Let all the earth keep silence before Him."*

Why should our words be few? Because the more we talk, the more likely it is that we will fail to honour God.

Proverbs 10:19 *In the multitude of words sin is not lacking, But he who restrains his lips is wise.*

One time when I was in the States, I visited the church of a well-known preacher, whose works had really influenced me. After the service, he stood in the front and people queued up to speak to him. I wanted to talk to him, just to thank him for his works and for serving God as he did. As I got closer, I began to be nervous, and I wanted to say something meaningful and useful. I didn't want to just blurt out anything. I wanted to pick my words. And he is just a man – a sinner like you and me! How much more should we choose our words before God?

Rather short and sincere prayers than long and empty ones. Rather three true, meaningful and appropriate hymns, than fifteen windy and shallow songs. Rather a short testimony of God's goodness than a long rambling report of your last week's activities.

If we approach cautiously, and listen carefully, and conserve our words, and we must also...

IV. Conscientiously Fulfilling our Duties

Ecclesiastes 5:4 *Pay what you have vowed --*

Quite simply, what we promise God, we must keep. We must follow through on our vows and commitments.

Now Solomon says it is better not to vow than to vow and not pay. If it is better to not vow, why bother vowing at all? Consider marriage. It is better to not get married, than it is to marry and break your vows by divorcing. Does that mean we should never marry? No. Vows are wonderful things. Vows are some of the deepest acts of love we can make before God. Making promises is part of growing in the Lord. Making commitments forces us to go beyond mediocrity and brings some sense of accountability into our lives.

You might remember the famous friendship of David and Jonathan. Their love for one another created one of the most powerful friendships every recorded. Do you know how they deepened their commitment and their love for each other?

1 Samuel 18:3 *Then Jonathan and David made a covenant, because he loved him as his own soul.*

Whether it is keeping your membership vows, or following through on a personal promise you made to God following a sermon – true worship fulfils its promises and commitments. Even at cost:

Psalm 15:1-2 *LORD, who may abide in Your tabernacle? Who may dwell in Your holy hill? ² He who walks uprightly, And works righteousness, And speaks the truth in his heart, He who swears to his own hurt and does not change;*

Let me say it in a sentence: **True worship corresponds to the true God. False worship is false because it does not consider who it is that it claims to worship.**

So, let me ask you this:

Is this the God you know? Have you ever come to God and been reconciled to Him through Christ, and begun a new life where He is at the centre? Or are you still ruling your own life. In that case, you can never worship God until you are born again, until the miracle of new life happens in your heart.

Second question:

What comes into your mind when you think of God? Is He mighty enough to cause you to think twice before coming to worship? Is He great enough to cause you to want to hear Him more than broadcast your own voice? Is He dignified enough to put a rein on your tongue and want to say no more than you know is true and fitting and appropriate? Is He majestic and worthy enough to compel you to keep track of your vows, and fulfil them?

The true God is. So know Him, and fear Him – for this is the whole duty of man.