

Worship

Ecclesiastes 5:1-7

Russ Kennedy

Worship ... this may well go down in Christian history as the era of worship. A lot of thought, writing, development and yes, fighting, has gone into Christian expressions of praise to God. But we have been very much focused in the elements. This was good and important. But we much never forget that it is the people who worship.

Why does Solomon address our approach to God in worship?

That this is a question for us betrays our wrong approach to the book.

A person would foolish not to think clearly about how to approach and what to say in God's presence. A wise person will think about it much.

One writer has illuminated both the original and the contemporary worshipper when he says, "[Here, the] target is the well-meaning person who likes a good sing and turns up cheerfully enough to church; but who listens with half an ear, and never quite gets round to what he has volunteered to do for God. (Kidner 52)

Church is a messy place. It is full of sinners and saints. It is full of the sincere and the sincerely wrong. People complain, rebel, gossip, lie, deceive, manipulate. The Christian realist understands that we are not perfect and certainly not perfectly holy yet. That we have not arrived should not surprise us. We hope for better. But we are all flawed and some are even foolish. It is stupid and unhelpful to deny this.

Listen to the New Living Translation of these two paragraphs.

Ecclesiastes 5:1–7

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.

The beginning and the end of the text gives us the theme. The ESV says, "Guard your steps..." (v.1) and "God is the one you must fear..." (v. 7). When we worship, we must be careful to fear God. So, this text then is examining how that had gone wrong in life of the Jews.

Worship Then

Worship was regulated by the Mosaic Law. Nearly everything was prescribed" the sacrifices, the priests, the times, the ways.

Worship was sin and sacrifice oriented. Everything about what was ordered and regulated was to show how sin separated and how the sacrifices dealt with sin.

Worship was all about place, priests and process. There were holy places, holy priests, holy sacrifices... Though there was some freedom for expressions of response, the simple reality was that Jewish worship at the tabernacle or Temple grounds was bloody and loud with dying beasts and blood-spattered altars.

Worship included praise and singing, prayers, and sacrifices. We have the book of prayers and songs that David the King wrote. We have stories of times of worship, particularly in the Temple in Jerusalem that were full of joy and celebration.

Preaching and instruction were supposed to be a central feature but were often missing. The priests were supposed to teach the people but were condemned by the prophets for their failures to do so.

During the exile the synagogue or meeting house became the place of instruction. Rabbi's took the place of the priests. At the return and rebuilding of the Temple, the synagogues continued to be a featured place of the gathering of Jewish people to hear the Word.

A word about structure. These two paragraphs are almost exactly parallel and symmetrical. There is a command, followed by the reason or grounds for obedience and an enigmatic proverb to make us stop and think.

Solomon had observed what happens in seasons and situations of life. He has brought a sense of reality to all of this. How can we be fulfilled and joyful here and not become depressed and despairing over its apparent futilities and frustrations? Now he goes to the temple that God had allowed him to build. There the worship God had prescribed was being transformed from a tent to a magnificent building. He watched the worshipers come and go, praising God, praying, sacrificing, and making vows. You would think, particularly in the early days of the Temple, that people would be passionate and pure in their worship. It would be easy to see the beauty, hear the music, watch the sacrifices and the throngs of people and think only about how great and glorious all this was.

But that is not what Solomon found...

Worship's Warning

Solomon is wise. He is not jaded. He is not negative. He is simply a realist. He sees what is really there, not just he wants to see. He observes that many of them were not at all sincere in their worship. They left the Temple of God in worse spiritual condition than when they had entered. What was their sin? They were robbing God of the reverence and honor that He deserved. Their acts of worship were perfunctory, insincere, and hypocritical.

Their Approach to God (v. 1-3)

¹ Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they are doing evil. ² Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few. ³ For a dream comes with much business, and a fool's voice with many words. [ESV]

In their Attitudes (v. 1)

Come in a proper way. They were to be alert and attentive to the sins and folly that they could easily fall into. There was a sense of the seriousness of coming into the holy presence of a holy God. This was not about a certain kind of behavior – an certain way of walking, of carrying oneself, of speaking in hushed tones, of bowed heads. It was, even in the Old Covenant, a matter of the heart.

Come with a prepared heart. There was a kind of serious intentionality that required thought and preparation. They were not dropping by the Temple Bar to have a chat with friends and God who served them the religious beer and wine. The Temple, the House of God, was marked by soaring, heart-grabbing beauty, loud music and... the screaming cries and hot blood smells of dying sacrifices. The outer court's troughs ran with the outpoured blood of bulls, goats and sheep. There were the strong aromas of incense mixed with the metallic tang of blood and the reek of cooking meat. Worship was a powerfully visceral experience.

Given this, the Jewish worshipper still need to come with a prepared heart.

In their Hearing (v. 1)

They were to have a heart poised to listen. This is quite surprising. At first you wonder, "Listen to what?" When the worshipper came to the Temple, they were supposed to sing and hear the Word of God and words from God. Sadly, over time, this diminished. The Temple became a place to do, not to hear. Yes, in the midst of the heady experience of a very physical worship, they were to come tuned to listen.

They were to have a heart poised to obey. The word for hear and listen in this text implied a right kind of response. Obedience was expected. What they hear, they were to heed. They have to understand that sacrifices are not substitutes for obedience. King Saul found out when he tried to cover up his disobedience with his pious promises (1 Samuel 15:12-23). Someone has commented, "Offerings in the hands without obedient faith in the heart become 'the sacrifice of fools,' because only a fool thinks he can deceive God. The fool thinks he is doing good, but he or she is only doing evil. And God knows it." (Wiersbe 64)

In their Praying (v. 2)

Too much praying is often too many words. We are just talking, not praying. We are just reciting a string of religious phrases and prayer jargon that is not really praying. It is the repeating of empty phrases. It bears little resemblance to real communication. And God does not speak King James English. John Bunyan wrote: "In prayer, it is better to have a heart without words, than words without a heart."

In their Busyness (v.3)

This is a bit hard to know what is being referred to. It seems that he is warning them about the restlessness of mind and life that leads to day dreams and irreverent babble. The Jewish worshipper needed to focus on the acts of worship. In some they participated. In others they were observers. But a restless mind occupied with the empty vanities and fruitless pursuits of this world would be distracted and distant in the passing moments of worship.

Their Promises to God (v. 4-7)

Vows and promises to God were an important part of the Jewish worship. They were a covenant response to covenanting God.

⁴ When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow. ⁵ It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. ⁶ Let not your mouth lead you into sin, and do not say before the messenger that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry at your voice and destroy the work of your hands? ⁷ For when dreams increase and words grow many, there is vanity; but God is the one you must fear.

In the Making of a Vow (v. 4-5)

Vows to God were serious things. They were not to be entered into lightly. The Jewish worshipper was to reflect an understanding of how serious God took His own promises to them. They were fools to trifle with God, as many found out. The cost to keep the vow was almost always less than the cost of breaking the vow. If you make a vow with no real intent to keep you lie to God. You are trying to manipulate God. It reverses the roles and makes God the petitioner at the throne of the worshipper.

In the Keeping of a Vow (v. 6)

Some who had made the vow were delaying to keep it, hoping they could get out of it. When the priest, here referred to as a messenger, came to collect the promised sacrifice or gift, the person would say, "Please forget about my vow! It was a mistake!" [Adapted from (Wiersbe)] Keeping a promise, a covenant, a vow is very important. To intentionally break or dishonor a promise is a sin that strikes at the very character of God. Everything we hope for in the future is grounded in the absolute truthfulness and trustworthiness of God. He has kept His promises to us; how can we break our promises to Him?

Frankly, it is frighteningly easy. We get in a situation in which we tell God what we will do if He delivers, provides, protects. He does so. Then we casually walk away and the promises we made fade and dim. We become so used to not being bound to our word that we think God does not bind us to our promises. This is foolishness and vanity and clutching at the wind.

In the Fearing of God (v. 7)

It was easy in the impressiveness of the Temple, its soaring heights and soul stirring imagery to be lifted in awe and pressed to an emotional high, even a spiritual ecstasy. But the worshipper was warned to be sure that the inner reality matched the outer experience. All of the momentary, passing words and wonders of music, ceremony, drama, sacrifice paled in contrast to the compelling need to fear God. It is possible to have an experience of worship without worshipping.

The last sentence is a little elusive in verse 3, but much clearer in verse 7. Kidner helps us by pointing out that, "The dreams appear to be daydreams, reducing worship to verbal doodling. Verse 3 seems to mean that, by its very quantity, an excess of talk is bound to throw up folly, just as an excess of business ends in troubled dreams. Such a saying confronts us with the fact that fools are not a fixed type, but people behaving in a certain way. In the context of worship, that way is to pour out a stream of pious phrases which trifle with our Sovereign and outrun our actual thinking and intending.

Our excuses, when eventually we are taken up on what we have said in church, will sound as lame as any hoaxer's or defaulter's." (Kidner 53-54)

Worship Now

There is always unfinished business in the Old Testament Scriptures. We do not move from the less true to the more true when we pass from the Old to the New. Rather, we move from promise to fulfilment. This is never more important than when we consider worship and the themes of temple, priesthood, sacrifice and covenant. 'God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect' (Hebrews 11:40).

We gather with freedom. Worship is grace, Christ and cross oriented. The work of the Word and Spirit in us and among our gatherings is to highlight the Lord Jesus. Now we celebrate what Christ has done, what He is doing now and what we hope and look forward to.

It is not about coming as sinners and with sacrifices to be made. It is about being saved and coming as redeemed persons, as saints. Yes, we expose and deal with our sins. Yes, sinners are welcome to come and see, to hear and believe. But we do not gather here to agonize over, to make atonement for our sins as sinners. We are here by grace. The redemptive work has been totally done for us.

Worship is in spirit and in truth. It is not about places, priests and procedures. There are no sacred spaces, no sanctuaries, no holy buildings. This is a meeting house. I know it is common for us to call this facility a church – it is not. You are the church here. When the gathering is over, the church goes home.

We, believers, are the house of God and the temple of God. You, the people are God's tabernacle, God's temple, God's building. When you are here, God is here as His Presence in His people.

Worship may include praise, singing, praying, communion, baptism culminating in preaching and teaching.

Gathering's Guides

There are many connections to Christ from this text, as we have seen. But the main thread is to Hebrews 12:28-29, "Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; for indeed our God is a consuming fire."

This text highlights two serious issues: that of giving and of speaking. The New Testament notes that you do with your money and with your mouth are two of the clearest marks of genuine spirituality. Your heart will tend to run after your treasure. Your mouth will tend to speak out of the overflow of your heart. With that in mind, give heed then to how this text connects to us, in our day as a New Covenant people.

How clear, simple, realistic is your approach to gathering with God's people? How often do you think about whether God is pleased with how you gather?

Your Preparation to Gather with God's People

Be Prepared (v. 1)

Be prepared when you come to church gatherings. Focus your heart and mind for what will take place here. Try to lessen distractions. Resolve conflicts. Direct children. Repent of sins. Come with expectancy and hope.

Be Attentive (v. 1)

Be attentive with a heart poised to listen (v. 1). I cannot stress how important it is to come to the gatherings of our church ready to listen to God's Word and to share with God's people. Without hearing there can be no understanding of the kingdom of God; thus Jesus repeats, 'He who has ears, let him hear'. (Matthew 11:15; 13:9, 43; John 8:47).

Prepare your children to give attention and not be distracting. Wisely seat them. Train them to listen, to be engaged as much as they can. Expect them to participate. Encourage and correct when needed. We believe it is important for children to be with us. We believe that they will learn as they observe your own engagement with the elements of worship. They will not understand the sermons. They children. They are unsaved. But they will understand in their hearts that something important is going on. Many young people, including my own, who have come to Christ later, have testified to the benefit later of being with the believers in the gatherings.

Be Restrained (v. 2)

Be restrained in the noise of your words and in the ramblings of your prayers (v. 2). God is not interested nor impressed by sloganized speeches that pass for prayers. Too often our praying in public and private is not the way we talk. Eschew prayer language and some kind of formal, fake phrases.

Be restrained in the constant distracting words in your heart that you experience in your mind. What do you think about when you are here? Where is the real focus of your heart? What are you paying attention to on your mobile?

Be Warned (v. 3)

Be warned about living in a dream world, the fantasy world made up of foolish, self-deceiving words. (v.3). Christians often have this fantasy world of spiritual dreams that simply does not match up to the reality of their lives. You think you are spiritual when you are actually struggling with sin. You think you are serving God when you are really pursuing your agenda. You think you are worshipping when you have little thought about God. You think you are sacrificing when really you are only tipping God. Jesus addressed the dire effects of self-deception and hypocrisy. Christian realism really begins with careful and insightful personal realism.

Your Commitments to Serve among God's People**Be Faithful (v.4-5)**

Be faithful to do what you have committed to the Lord to do. Sometimes these concerns and commands are limited to stewardship and giving. Yes, that is the particular issue Solomon was observing. It is an important aspect of faithfulness as a believer. But it is not limited to giving. It includes all that God commands and commends to us in our gifts, talents and one-anothering. Many of you have commitments to ministries: are you carrying it out? When it is time, do you beg off? Are you regularly late? How important to you is your word?

We teach that every believer in a church should be involved in ministry. This is not merely attending, but also serving. Every believer has at least one gift and many have talents and abilities that can be committed to ministry. With the exception of a few ministries using gifts of helps, this means membership. Membership is its own kind of commitment. We teach that believers should be committed to a local, gathered

church. This means being a member. Too many people attend a church, profit from its ministries, hang out with its people, but never commit, never serve and therefore are not truly engaged with the life of the Body.

Be Careful (v. 6)

Be careful to do what you have committed to. The sin in verse 6 is that of not keeping your promises and following through with your commitments. Do you carry out the ministries you have committed to? Are you there when expected? Are you on time? Are you prepared to do the ministry? Do you make excuses for yourself? Do you treat your ministry with the same regard and care as you treat your job (assuming you are a Biblically diligent employee)? Do what you say you will do. Be a person who keeps their word. Be dependable.

One well-known pastor has observed, "God hears what we say and holds us to our promises, unless they were so foolish that He could only dismiss them. If providence prevents us from fulfilling what we promised, God understands and will release us. If we made our vows only to impress others, or perhaps to "bribe" the Lord ("If God answers my prayer, I will do so and so or give so much!"), then we will pay for our careless words. Many times in... pastoral ministry I have heard sick people make promises to God as they asked for healing, only to see those promises forgotten when they recovered. (Wiersbe)

Be Warned (v. 6-7)

People make empty vows because they live in a religious "dream world"; they think that words are the same as deeds (v. 7). Their worship is not serious, so their words are not dependable. They enjoy the "good feelings" that come when they make their promises to God, but they do themselves more harm than good. They like to "dream" about fulfilling their vows, but they never get around to doing it. They practice a make-believe religion that neither glorifies God nor builds Christian character.

'The word fool is repeated throughout this text. It is a scathing indictment. To treat your relationship with God and His people with casual disregard is evil (v.1), sinful (v.6) and an affront, a provocation that God will deal with (6b). (Kidner 123).

Reflect and Respond

Jim Winter has pithily captured this text, "Prepare for worship—present your worship in a God ordered way—promises must be seriously considered—above all, stand in awe of God!" (Winter 74).

We should gather as Christians with reverence for God. Reverence does not mean a certain kind of posture or performance or pitifulness. Reverence for God is an attitude of the heart that will transform our behavior. Reverence for God will cause us to prepare for worship. Reverence for God will cause us to come ready to listen rather than to blabber like fools. Reverence for God will cause us to take our commitments seriously and not to delay fulfilling any promises we have made to God. Reverence for God will cause us not to come up with lame excuses for not fulfilling our promises. Reverence for God will transform our gatherings and our lives. (Griedanus Kindle Loc 1744-1748)

Be very sure, brothers and sisters, that you fear God. Then nothing will be empty and vain, frustrating and futile.

Be very sure, brothers and sisters, that you fear God. Then life as worship will be full and sweet with gladness and glory.