

When Worship is Evil

Eccl. 5:1-7

By Randy Wages

9/11/11

Note: The text below was prepared for oral delivery rather than for publication in print. As such, be aware that sentence fragments are intentionally used and that this document has not been edited to correct the errors in grammar, sentence structure, etc.

I. Introduction:

- A. As many of you know, today is the 10th anniversary of that tragic terrorist attack on American soil when on September 11th, 2001, hijacked commercial airliners were used to bring down the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City. In the weeks leading up to today's anniversary, our local newspaper has run several articles commemorating the 9/11 tragedy and the profound impact it had on our nation. And one article that I found interesting pointed out how in the months following 9/11, that there was a noticeable uptick in people's interest and involvement in organized religion. And, as is often the case as things settle down following traumatic events, much of this reactionary surge in religious interest has since subsided. But by the tenor of the article you could sense the common reaction by many that this new found surge in religious interest was a good thing. But such a reaction seems to ignore the Bible's clear assertion that not all religion is good.
- B. Like me you may heard comments (intended to be complimentary) directed toward folks that go like this: "Well at least they are going to church somewhere" or "They are good church-going folks." But such sentiments do not reflect the tenor of scripture. In fact, we're warned over and over again throughout God's word to be on guard against false religion and in particular the deception of religion that comes in the name of Christ (calling itself "Christianity") while denying the doctrine of Christ.
- C. Well, this morning we will examine the first 7 verses of Ecclesiastes, chapter 5 where God through the wise king Solomon spoke of those who enter the house of God to worship, bringing what He calls the "sacrifice of fools" whereby they (unknowingly) attempt to worship in a way that is actually evil in God's sight. And so today I want to address the subject of "When Worship is Evil."
- D. There are 2 types of worship: (1) evil or (2) good – the true worship of God in Spirit and in truth. And these 2 are mutually exclusive. Right now, your attempts to worship God are either evil in His sight or else your worship is viewed as an acceptable act of obedience that redounds to God's glory. So this morning, let's all examine our own hearts as to whether our attempts at worship are good (acceptable and honoring to God) or evil.

II. First let's read the entire passage from the beginning of Eccl. 5 through verse 7 and then I'll come back and make a few comments. Beginning in verse 1, it reads:

Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God, and be more ready to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools: for they consider not that they do evil. ²Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few. ³For a dream cometh through the multitude of business; and a fool's voice is known by multitude of words. ⁴When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it; for he hath no pleasure in fools: pay that which thou hast vowed. ⁵Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay. ⁶Suffer not thy mouth to cause thy flesh to sin; neither say thou before the angel, that it was an error: wherefore should God be angry at thy voice, and destroy the work of thine hands? ⁷For in the multitude of dreams and many words there are also divers vanities: but fear thou God.

III. Outline:

A. After studying this, I decided it might be helpful to consider how the distinctions set forth in these verses fall in 1 or more of 3 very telling categories as it relates to this subject of "When Worship is Evil" in contrast to when it is good. So consider with me these 3 things:

1. The perspective from which we worship: From whose viewpoint do we approach God to worship? Are we striving to understand and view things from God's perspective or do we remain consumed with our own natural point of view.
2. Source of truth or doctrine that forms the foundation of our worship: Is it God's word or man's word?
3. The offering or sacrifice we bring: Now today we don't bring animals to be sacrificed on an altar as God had commanded the nation Israel under the Old Covenant. That was abolished by Christ's fulfillment of what was being typified there. But there is still a sense in which we make an offering or a sacrifice. I am referring to the ground or basis upon which we believe we are accepted before almighty God because that is what their sacrifices pictured. This speaks to our ground of salvation. And that, our ground of salvation, can be described in one of two ways, but not both. It can be likened to (1) the vain, sacrifice of fools or (2) to that which is an acceptable sacrifice – pleasing in God's sight.

B. So, as we consider this passage in more detail, keep these 3 things in mind as they are helpful in discerning what constitutes the proper, acceptable worship of God in contrast to vain, foolish, worship – worship that God not only calls foolish, but evil.

IV. Commentary on Eccl. 5:1-7:

A. Verses 1-3: So, going back now to verse 1, it reads...

1. ***Keep thy foot*** <or watch your step> ***when thou goest to the house of God, and be more ready to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools:*** <Now, I will come back and discuss this “sacrifice of fools” in more detail as this is key to our understanding. But for now, simply notice that we’re told to be ready to hear rather than offer a foolish sacrifice. This is an admonition for us to shut up and listen (to put it bluntly) and it is given because he says of those that offer the vain, sacrifice of fools that> ...***they consider not that they do evil.*** They do not realize that their sacrifice is foolish, vain, unacceptable, because they simply do not consider it / not even bothering to evaluate whether their approach to God in worship might be evil. And as such, they do not know that it is evil. So, at some point all of us need to be stopped in our tracks and hear from God. And to do so, we need to hush with our own opinions and set aside our preconceived notions in order that God might speak unto us – that we might hear a word from Him.

2. As we continue in verse 2, we read... ²***Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few.***
 - (a) He’s telling them much like Moses said at the Red Sea when the unarmed Israelites were trapped there and Pharaoh’s mighty army was in hot pursuit. And the Israelites began to murmur in distress. And Moses said, “Stand still (as in hush) and see the salvation of the Lord.” I’m reminded of Paul’s words in Romans 3:19 where he wrote, “***Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God.***” Until God shuts us up under the Gospel, we consider not (and therefore do not know) that our natural inclination as to how we are to worship and approach God is actually evil in His sight.

 - (b) We need to not be so rash to speak in the sense that so many urge us to, as in repeating the prescribed sinner’s prayer, or making our so-called public profession or decision for Jesus, or doing our part, as is so often suggested in this easy-believism culture of religion, in order to get ourselves saved. It’s as if preachers are offering up eternal salvation like the comedian, Larry, the cable guy urging their listeners to just “Git-r-done!” All you got to do is say this prayer, invite Jesus into your heart, or walk this aisle or make this profession or get baptized or go through this confirmation process or adhere to this catechism – whatever. No, we have to be shut up in offering or heeding the natural opinions of fallen sinners and be brought in guilty before God because until then, we do not even consider that our worship itself is evil. But the scripture tells us that our natural way of salvation, the “...***way that seemeth right unto a man,...***” is among the ways whose end is death.” (Proverbs 16:25).

(c) And in essence God's word is telling us this: Think of who you are doing business with. It is God who is in heaven and you're upon the earth. Let's get things in the right perspective. This phrase, "God in heaven" expresses His majesty, His sovereignty, His supremacy as Creator, far above us, the creature. It expresses His omniscience and His omnipotence – He is all knowing and all powerful! That's what we should have in mind when we pray after the manner of the model prayer as Christ taught, saying "Our Father which art in Heaven!" Let's hear from Him! Now remember the first 2 points I gave you to consider earlier:

(1) First: From whose perspective are we seeing things? Is it from Almighty God, the Creator who is in heaven or is it from our perspective of things – from the perspective of the mere, fallen sinful creature? Our tendency is to assume that we know how God is to be worshipped (why, we were brought up in church) and so it's just a matter of deciding to get serious about God and religion. And so some preacher comes along and tells us to do this or that and you too can be sure for heaven – you can get yourself saved if you'll only do your part. Won't you let Jesus come into your heart as some put it. And so many of us jump on that bandwagon and get that presumed requirement checked off and thereby we gain a false sense of security in thinking we've accepted Jesus and now we're just fine.

And we never even stop to consider it from God's perspective – to ask, "How can a holy God save me, a sinner?" What would truly reconcile a sinner before a holy God? And if we're blessed to start seeing things from God's point of view, we will quickly discover what fools we were to imagine that a holy God in heaven could accept me a fallen, depraved sinner here on earth on the basis of my having accepted Him as my personal Savior – my agreement to allow God to save me. How proud to imagine that my feeble responses to almighty, holy God would be the vital, determining, crowning event upon which I am forgiven of my sins and accepted in the presence of a holy God. That is to treat the precious shed blood of Christ as if it is inferior and subordinate to what I presume to really make the difference – my act of faith, my acceptance of the deal. And that's evil worship!

(2) And then remember the 2nd category that I suggested we consider, how the source of truth distinguishes our worship. Notice here in verse 2 that he writes, "...***let thy words be few.***" Many think that this may be addressing those who would pray long and extensive prayers to impress others in their public worship. And that understanding certainly may apply. But I believe this is also a reference to the source of truth upon which we enter into worship. Instead of being ready to express our opinions, as we read in verse 1, be ready to hear; the implied message being "hear from God" – not from you the creature or from the wisdom and opinion of mere sinful creatures such as you and me. But the issue is, "What does God say? – What is His gospel that is to be believed? – Not the natural man's perversion of the gospel.

3. And so in verse 3 he likens it to a confused dream as he says, ³*For a dream cometh through the multitude of business; and a fool's voice is known by multitude of words.*
- (a) I'm sure some of you have experienced restless nights where your mind raced with all the many tasks that you knew awaited you in your work or in your worries in the often hectic pace of this life. Well, this is what is being referenced when it says that "...*a dream cometh through the multitude of business;*" This is a simile, showing that just as a lack of sleep or a confused, incoherent dream may result from our being too busy – from a multitude of business; likewise, a fool's voice is known by the multitude of words.

(b) In the context of this passage, we do not want to be among the foolish or as one described here as a fool. This speaks of those who are fooled, who know not that what they deem to be good is actually evil in God's sight, who (in keeping with the context of the entire book of Ecclesiastes – "vanity of vanities, all is vanity") are worshipping in vain or foolishly. And their much speaking (to the exclusion of hearing God) makes them known as such – as fools. If someone talks enough about religion that is not from God's perspective but man's, showing an absence of a regard for God's character in their gospel doctrine – in how they presume to be saved – they are thereby exposed as a fool. And the sense of this passage seems to be saying to us naturally foolish sinners, set your own natural thoughts and many words aside that you may hear from God! Now look with me again at verses 4-6, where we read,

B. Verses 4-6: *When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it; for he hath no pleasure in fools: pay that which thou hast vowed. ⁵Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay. ⁶Suffer not thy mouth to cause thy flesh to sin; neither say thou before the angel, that it was an error: wherefore should God be angry at thy voice, and destroy the work of thine hands?*

1. As I read this, I was reminded of how many stories we've all heard over the years of one who, in the middle of a predicament of sorts, prayed to God that "if you'll get me out of this one I promise _____ (something exceptional in the way of a reformation or sacrificial duties or promises of service). And more often than not, these are not followed through with as men later explain to God – Lord, you know in the panic of the situation I was confused and I am going to better but I didn't really mean to promise that – you know I can't possibly do that or didn't mean it the way I felt at the time.
2. Well, there in verse 6, when it says "...*neither say thou before the angel, that it was an error:*" I believe this is referring to making excuses before the Lord, to Christ as He is referred to in Malachi 3:1 as "the angel of the covenant," as to why we can't keep that which we've promised. We are under no obligation to make any vow and we're told here that it would be better if we had not.

3. Now it may seem that these verses have moved us on to a different subject, but I think in the context, it again is reminding us of who we are dealing with – God almighty in heaven. And He is not to be trifled with, or taken for granted by our casually making commitments beyond our natural abilities to keep. We need to hush, stand still, and hear from Him so that we might learn of Him – so that our approach to Him, our sacrifice before Him might be acceptable – a sacrifice that is in sharp contrast to our being busy offering up something that proceeds from us – our promises and determination to do better (the works of our own hands). And that brings to the concluding verse, verse 7 which I believe ties this back into the context of our passage as we read,

C. Verse 7: *For in the multitude of dreams and many words there are also divers vanities: but fear thou God.*

1. So he is saying, that just as there are various or diverse vanities – empty, worthless, incoherent, confused thoughts in the multitude of dreams that come from our cluttered, racing minds, likewise there are many vain, empty, worthless, incoherent, confused notions found in our natural busyness in religion – in our going about to offer what he calls “the sacrifice of fools.” I’m speaking of the natural religion of man from which we all need deliverance. The scripture says that we’ve all gone out of the way. That there is none righteous, no not one.
2. And I believe that the “abundance of words” and “the making of unfulfilled vows” are set forth here as descriptions of those who offer the sacrifice of fools, whose very worship is seen as evil in the sight of God.
3. And in the conclusion of verse 7, he says instead of worshipping in vain, “..*fear thou God.*” This sets forth what is necessary for one to come before God with a sacrifice that is acceptable – not the evil, sacrifice of fools.

D. So, what does it mean to fear God?

1. It does not mean to be afraid of him as in being frightened or scared of God. But rather in the Bible, the fear of God speaks to having a reverential regard for His glory – for the honor of His character – that we might worship Him as He is uniquely revealed in Christ – as both a just God and a Savior.
2. And so to fear God is the opposite of remaining oblivious to or failing to consider that our approach or our offering might be evil. In other words, it is not to gloss over that – to excuse the implications of our flawed doctrine as I once did by saying, “Well, I just didn’t think of it that way.”

3. In the fear of God we seek Him as He is – seeing the wonder of how God could accept me, a sinner (not the other way around) and still be God. That’s what it is to see things from God’s perspective rather than ours. How can God (who is holy and just) accept a sinner such as you and I? He is holy. He cannot commune with sin. It is only through the blood of Christ, the sinner’s Substitute who put away those sins by paying the debt in full that was due unto them before the justice of God. It took the shedding of the infinitely valuable blood of the God-man, God in the flesh, the Lord Jesus Christ.
4. And yet in our day, the majority of so-called Christians will say that Christ died for everyone who ever lived – and so by their way of thinking, in His sacrificial, bloody death on the cross, He really did no more for those who go to hell than He did for those who are saved. Well, the implications of such thoughts are profound. They are evil. For such teaching has us imagining that something else – not Christ made the real difference in our salvation. And it shows no fear of God before their eyes. It reveals that at that point in time, they are not even considering how God could be holy and just in punishing Christ for the sins of any sinner and still send that sinner to hell anyway. That would make God an unjust monster. Clearly, that ‘christ’ didn’t get the job done. That would mean he actually redeemed no one and so there remains some busyness for the sinner to do to make the real difference in their salvation – or so they tragically imagine.

V. Verse 1: Now before we close, I want to go back to verse 1 and consider again, “When Worship is Evil.” As that verse reads, “***Keep thy foot*** <watch or guard your step, your ways> ***when thou goest to the house of God, and be more ready to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools: for they consider not that they do evil.***

- A. And that brings us to that 3rd consideration I asked you to keep in mind. Specifically, let us consider the offering or sacrifice we bring. I am speaking of the basis upon which we consider ourselves to be accepted before almighty God so as to worship Him. This speaks to our ground of salvation. And verse 1 warns us to not bring the sacrifice of fools, which is evil. And yet when we all initially approached God in our blind, lost spiritual state, we had no idea at that time that it was akin to offering the sacrifice of fools. As this scripture bears out, we didn’t even consider that possibility. And none of us do until God, in the day of His power, brings us to hear from Him under the sound of this Gospel of grace – God’s gospel wherein we behold His glory in the person and work of Christ!
- B. So, as we seek to apply what this passage teaches concerning our own worship, think of your offering or sacrifice in the same way that those literal sacrifices were to be offered as recorded in the Old Testament. Today, we do not offer the blood of animals upon an altar.

But how we approach God in worship (the equivalent of our sacrifice or offering so to speak) certainly should have in mind that which God intended to be typified by those old animal sacrifices if it is to be acceptable before God. This consideration of what distinguishes (1) approaching God with the evil, sacrifice of fools from (2) an approach to God that is acceptable in His sight, is as old and as simple to understand as that which we have recorded for us in the story of the first family – in two of Adam and Eve’s sons, Cain and Abel.

VI. Cain and Abel:

- A. Look with me in Genesis 4:1-5: ***“And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived, and bare Cain, and said, I have gotten a man from the LORD. ²And she again bare his brother Abel. And Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground. ³And in process of time it came to pass, that Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the LORD. ⁴And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof. And the LORD had respect unto Abel and to his offering: ⁵But unto Cain and to his offering he had not respect. And Cain was very wroth, and his countenance fell.”***
- B. As a side note, I was discussing Cain and Abel with my younger brother last weekend and as I began to share my understanding of this and began my rather detailed, one-sided discussion which eventually lead us to the issue of why Cain killed his brother Abel, he finally got a word in edgewise just long enough to suggest that it may have had something to do with his brother talking too much. But as the scripture suggests, that was not the real cause of Cain’s anger.
- C. At the time this took place, Cain and Abel were not young boys, but rather they were heads of households with wives and children and occupations. They were performing the duties of a priest in bringing their offerings. During this era the fathers, or the heads of the household, were, in essence, the priest of their families. We know that this practice carried on into the time of Abraham and continued until the Old Covenant, Levitical priesthood was established.
- D. And Cain & Abel’s offerings were not the first sacrifices offered to God for sin. It is clear that God had instructed Adam as to how and where he was to seek atonement for sin and worship and how to approach the living God. You can read of that in Genesis 3. And it is apparent that Adam, in turn, had taught his sons and daughters (similar to how Abraham would later teach Isaac as recorded in Genesis 22). So, as their father Adam had done before them, Cain and Abel, as heads of families brought their sacrifices and offerings to God. Cain brought the fruit of the ground, which he had worked to raise; and Abel brought a lamb.

E. Now notice from Genesis 4, verses 4 & 5, that the Lord's respect and acceptance (or disrespect and rejection) of the person and the sacrifice are one and the same. So it is key for us to understand what the difference is between the two sacrifices? They both brought the best products of their respective professions so Cain's inferior sacrifice could not be owing to it being anything less than his best in comparison to Abel's best. That isn't the issue. While Cain brought the very best that he could offer – the fruits of his own work, what distinguished Abel's offering is that it was a blood offering!

F. What was wrong with Cain's sacrifice?

1. It was a bloodless sacrifice and so a denial of the necessity that God's law and justice be perfectly fulfilled – denying the need for a righteousness that we cannot provide for ourselves.
2. Just as we read in Ecclesiastes 5, Cain didn't consider this offering or sacrifice of fools to be evil (not his act of worship) and yet his offering exposed that he had no fear of God – he was not considering it from God's perspective – having no regard for God as He is for it is apparent that it did not even dawn on Cain how insufficient the product of his own works were. Cain likely saw no difference in their offerings. It seems reasonable that he viewed this as many others do in our day – thinking that Abel was bringing a lamb because he was a shepherd just as Cain presented the fruit of the field because he was a farmer. And yet Cain's lack of understanding of what was required, unlike that reflected in Abel's sacrifice, showed a lack of recognition of his own sinfulness, his depravity, his guilt and defilement.
3. Cain's offering denied his need of a Redeemer, the Lord Jesus Christ, to pay (by the shedding of His blood) the debt before God's justice that was owed due unto Cain's sins. Cain would be his own mediator, and his own intercessor.
4. So Cain's offering exalted himself, his own works and efforts and denied that he deserved condemnation and death if judged by his very best efforts to serve God. He approached God on the grounds of his own merit and works. He had worked hard and was proud of the fruit of his fields.
5. Cain's offering was not an evidence of God-given faith, but of unbelief and disobedience as he refused God's way of atonement, acceptance, and worship and brought instead, what he thought best – what seemed right to him. And so do many today when they approach God expecting to be accepted because of their act or their exercise of faith.

G. Why did God have respect unto Abel's offering?

1. It was an offering of blood in recognition of the necessity that a perfect satisfaction to God's holy law and inflexible justice must be rendered by Christ's bloody death in order for God to save any sinner. Unlike Cain, the significance of his offering had nothing to do with being a product of his profession as a shepherd. No – it was because he offered blood, typifying the necessity of the shed blood of the promised Messiah – the blood of the Lamb of God, the Lord Jesus Christ Himself.
2. It was a confession in recognition of his own sin, depravity, guilt, and defilement. Abel came humbly before God, realizing his need of a substitute, needing a righteousness or satisfaction to be made to the justice of God that he could not produce for himself, this all being typified by the blood of the animal he offered.
3. It was a confession of the inadequacy of his best efforts to keep the law, to perfectly obey God so as to establish a righteousness of his own.
4. Abel's was an offering of true faith as we're explicitly told just that in Hebrews 11:4 where it reads: ***“By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts: and by it <his sacrifice> he being dead yet speaketh.”*** And we had better listen. Notice that Abel did not become righteous by offering the blood sacrifice, but rather it gave evidence that he was righteous – God having accounted unto Him the very righteousness that Christ would in time accomplish for Him on Calvary's cross. Abel believed and obeyed God. He came to God the way God told him to come, the way His word tells us all to come.

VII. Closing:

- A. So, here's the long and short of it. If you want to know if your faith is genuine, then consider your sacrifice / your offering / the basis upon which you approach God for acceptance – for salvation. If it is by genuine, God-given faith – you'll bring the sacrifice of Abel. To do that is to be able to sing that old hymn, “Nothing but the Blood” because now, unlike before, you really mean it. What can wash away my sins? Nothing but the blood of Jesus! By contrast, if your salvation is based upon anything other than or in addition to the satisfaction Christ rendered in His obedience unto death, you bring the sacrifice of Cain – the sacrifice of fools brought by those who have yet to see (by the eye of faith) that it is evil. Now that is when well-intentioned, sincere, religious worship is actually evil in God's sight.

- B. The Psalmist wrote in Psalm 51:17, “***The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.***” All who are saved must and will be broken – brought to bow in the fear of God so as to plead Christ’s blood and righteousness alone – the offering He made for all whom He saves.
- C. In keeping with the teaching of Eccl. 5, may your words be few. May God grant someone you saving grace – so as to have no other plea before God in heaven than that of the justified, saved publican as recorded in Luke 18. In that parable, his justification before God (his very salvation) was evidenced by his few words – his simple cry, “***...God be merciful to me a sinner.***” May we truly approach God as mercy beggars, seeking salvation based upon nothing but the blood!

Footnote from the author: While this sermon was prepared and delivered by me, I often utilize the commentaries, study helps, and teachings of others to supplement my own prayerful study of the scriptures. Since this document was not originally prepared for publication in print, please excuse and recognize that it was unfeasible to properly identify and credit all of the various original sources used to develop the content herein. Ultimately, it is my sincere and foremost objective to accurately present the gospel of God’s grace found in the only infallible source, God’s word itself – the Bible.