

Ecclesiastes

Lecture 8

By [Rev. Kevin Chiarot](#)

Let's move to chapter 5, but first a little theological background. In the beginning God made a sanctuary in Eden. Eden was in a high place, for four rivers flowed out of it to water the surrounding world. It had many trees, but two were special. And Adam was given priestly responsibility to guard and tend the sanctuary. What happened in the Eden sanctuary was of momentous significance. It led to a curse being placed on the whole creation. After man fell, God placed a cherub with a flaming sword to guard the way back to the Tree of Life.

Later, after God had chosen Israel, he instructed Moses to build a tent – a tabernacle – a new sanctuary. It also had architectural trees and fruit, and it had sculpted cherubs over the ark and sewn cherubs in the tapestry. It was a new Eden. It was where God dwelt with man. Later Solomon built the temple, much more glorious, also containing various tree and angelic images in the architecture. And the temple was the center of life for Israel. The place where God placed His name. Finally, Jesus comes. He calls his own body the temple and says; after it is destroyed he will raise it up in three days. Then he constitutes the church as his body, the new sanctuary, the temple of the Spirit.

With that backdrop, we come Ecclesiastes 5:1-3, and it is of pivotal importance in the scheme of the book. Solomon has put searching questions to the world; he has been ruthless in examining his experience. He has concluded that everything is vapor.

Here, in chapter 5, we have something different, and at first, even strangely out of place in this book. Here we come to the house of God. Solomon has not forgotten this house. This is the place we MUST go in the world Solomon describes. We NOW know what kind of world this is. Everything outside, you can hold loosely and with sober detachment. But we should take THIS place with utter seriousness, and that is what Solomon does here. The church is where we encounter the solid, weighty reality of the living God. And the living God and His worship are NOT vapor.

In this place we have no personal observations from Solomon. No, I saw this and I said that in my heart. No, I stopped to consider. Here God talks and we listen.

So what Solomon does briefly – and pointedly - is instruct us on our conduct as we come to the house of God. I will make two points: word and sacrifice in v.1, and prayer in vv. 2-3.

Word

First, word and sacrifice. The first thing Solomon does is warn us. Be careful, he says, guard your steps when you go to the house of God. “Steps” is a Hebrew idiom which means your way of life. He is saying “examine your life as you come to worship.” Prepare for it. Set aside some time beforehand to compose your soul. For the sanctuary of God is always the center of the world. What happens there is momentous.

Solomon continues: When we come to the house of God: to draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools. The most important thing to guard, and here Solomon agrees with James, is your tongue. Be slow to speak, be quick to listen.

The preacher’s opening salvo tells against all our religious theatrics, all our chatty, talkative casualness, our lust for entertainment, our long-windedness, our platitudes, our endless pseudo-spiritual babbling. Here there is no grasping. For you have no leverage over God. Thus, brevity is the order of the day. Where there are many words, transgression is unavoidable. Here, the Scriptures are read and God speaks. We are to listen, which here means obey. The chief command is not SPEAK, O Israel, but HEAR, O Israel. Faith comes by hearing, not talking. And hearing the Word of God has become hard in our day because of all the noise and chatter. Now we arrogantly assume our words mean so much, so we talk too much. This too is vanity.

Here the center of gravity radically shifts. God’s Word, heard in Scripture, in all of its commanding Majesty, is to be the towering force in your life. Listening, we are told in the next phrase, is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools.

Here we should notice a few things:

First, the basic structure of this text is the basic structure of worship in both testaments. Word and Sacrifice. We listen to the Word, then we celebrate the sacrifice. In the NT of course, we don’t offer a sacrifice, but we remember the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ. That is the everlasting pattern. Word and Sacrament. God talks, then God feeds us. He speaks, we listen, then he gives, and we take and eat and drink. It’s not hard, but the pattern is obscured by all of our religious noise.

Second, we must note a terrible danger. It existed for Israel and it exists for us. That is, you can go through worship in a trance. It can become dead, even blind,

ritual or repetition. It can even come to be seen as some sort of manipulation or appeasement of God.

This is the background for the long and heated polemic of the prophets of Israel against the abuse of the priesthood and the sacrificial system. It's not that the public worship, the cult per se, is bad. It was ordained by God in Israel, and it was quite ordered and formal and liturgical. But its abuse is a monstrosity. And the prophets railed against reliance on the liturgy, on "coming to church," as crucial as it is. Without justice, the Lord, through Amos could say "I hate, I despise, your festivals and your feasts." Jeremiah told the fools of his day to stop relying on the temple. Stop saying "the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord" as if the temple cult could save a covenant breaking people.

Third, we must see the fulfillment of this whole dual relation between Word and sacrifice in Jesus Christ. He brings, and indeed is, the Word of God. He listens and obeys perfectly in our place. Then he offers the sacrifice for our failure to listen. This is graphically laid out in Psalm 40, which speaks of the Messiah this way:

In sacrifice and offering you have not delighted, but you have given me an open ear.

The ear of the Messiah was dug out and formed by God to be a listening, obedient ear. God never delighted in burnt and sin offerings, they always pointed forward to an obedient living sacrifice. And in and through THIS listening obedience, Jesus becomes the one acceptable sacrifice.

And this reality of Christ as substituting for us both in his listening obedience and in his sacrificial death, is the reason we come composed to listen. Our worship is already perfected in Him. He presents us before the face of the Father, He gathers up our defective lives, our defective prayer and praise, and purifies it in Himself as our Elder brother, and presents it whole and undefiled in the flesh which he took from us. So you don't need to chat, and we don't need spiritual gymnastics or frenzied excitement. We have this One, this Word and Sacrifice, who acts here in our stead and on our behalf. So compose yourself.

Now, back to the phrase "the sacrifice of fools." To offer the sacrifice of fools is to perform the liturgy with casualness. To go through the motions, as if Christ, having done what he has done, is lighter than all the vapor we froth at the mouth over during the week.

The end of v.1 one says that fools who do this do not know they are doing evil. Fools are so foolish they fool themselves. When is the last time someone said to you: Yeah, I'm a fool. No, the trademark of fools is they think they are wise. The text says it's EVIL to come unguarded, to mouth your way through the worship, to

sing listlessly. This means we are to be attentive, to respond robustly, to listen obediently, to let God's Word dig through the granite in our ears, to sing with fervor, to say Amen with a loud voice. Our worship is a dialogue between the Lord and his people. We are to lift up your voices and engage in it, with full sincerity of heart and mind and body. This is the proper response to the abuse of the liturgy. God did not tell Israel, when they abused the liturgy, to replace it with a more informal and spontaneous service so they can be authentic. He called them to a repentant use of the order He prescribed. That is Word and Sacrifice.

Prayer

Our Second point is prayer. V.2 be not rash with your mouth. So you have composed yourself. You have come to listen. You grasp the gravity of this place. Then, when it does come time to speak, to pray, to respond, don't gush forth. This is the value of the historical forms of worship (liturgy). I spoke of the dangers of any form of worship, including formal forms. Let me say a word in defense of traditional liturgical worship. It trains you on how to respond. It gives us brief, pithy, theologically sound answers and places them in our all too rash and verbose mouths. The liturgy says: look, here are faithful words, tried words, biblical words, historically tested words – and crucially here – FEW words - make them YOUR words.

There is a wonderful piece of advice from one of the desert fathers. They were early church fathers who would often live in the desert to work on a life of prayer. His name was Macarius and he was asked: How should one pray? He said there is no need at all to make long discourses. It is enough to stretch out ones hand and say: Lord, as you will and as you know have mercy. And if the conflict grows fiercer: say, Lord help. That from a man who spent his life in prayer and solitude.

There is a marvelous story from Tolstoy, about three Russian monks on a faraway Island, who are visited by a bishop, who realizes they don't know the Lord's Prayer. So he spends all his time teaching them the Lord's Prayer. When he's leaving on the boat he sees the monks running across the water and saying: wait, we can't remember the Lord's Prayer! So the bishop asks them, well, how do you normally pray? And they say: we just say; Dear God, there are three of you and there are three of us, have mercy on us! The bishop, impressed by their simplicity, dismisses them in peace. In the sanctuary, God doesn't want you to talk his ear off. He doesn't want our idiosyncratic ramblings. We are not heard by multiplying words.

The next phrase in our text says "do not let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God." Before God, refers to the temple, the place of public worship. Talking a lot in God's presence is the sign of a fool. Whoever restrains his words is wise. The rationale for our restraint is given at the end of v.2: for God is in heaven and you are on earth. This is the most important geography lesson we

learn in this public worship. God is in heaven and you are on earth. Biblical Geography 101. Until you get that right, don't study the maps in the back of your Bible.

Now, heaven is God's throne. The idea is that God is the infinite Transcendent Lord, the one wholly separate from His creation. He dwells in unapproachable Light. He is not to be trifled with, especially in the sanctuary, in the public worship of the church where He dwells among us in the Spirit.

Of course, this means that God is free to be near us as well. He is immanent or close, as we've already seen here, he speaks to us, and receives tempered and brief responses from us, he accepts us a living sacrifices in the sacrifice of Christ. He is our Father, but he is our Father in Transcendent glory, our Father IN Heaven. God is in heaven, and, the text continues, we are on earth. Talking too much, rashness, is the sign that you flunked biblical geography 101. You are on earth. God is in heaven commanding the expanding universe. That means he's tough to impress theologically. And he knows what we need before we ask. So, the end of v.2 says, let your words be few. Of course, few does not mean zero.

This is not the absolute silence of Buddhism. This is restraint in conversing with our Father in heaven. Just as you composed your soul to listen, so, when it comes time to pray, it is good to compose your thoughts.

This is the value of short, theologically sound, written prayers. I have found that when I don't compose my prayers, or at least outline what I want to say, I pray four times longer than I need to. And the result is that people are subjected to all my boring idiosyncrasies. When it comes time to pray, compose yourself and let your words be few.

Finally, v.3 says for a dream comes through much busy-ness. Dreams in the ANE were not highly esteemed. They were often associated, as here, with vanity, with delusions, with airy, ephemeral things. Here the idea seems to be too much busy-ness, too much activity, will lead either to sleepless nights or, worse, the relating of silly dreams in the house of God. So, few words, even fewer dreams. We will say more about dreams in a bit.

Finally, we have something of a summary when it comes to speech or prayer in God's presence at the end of v.3: A fool's voice comes with many words. Our proliferation of words cheapen the Word. So, in the sanctuary, God wants to train us to respond aright. And the only perfect response is the life and death of Jesus.

Have you ever noticed how utterly restrained Jesus' speech is? Especially when speaking to the Father. How terse, how understated, how compact. Not a single wasted syllable. He listens deeply. Responds sparingly. When he was asked how to pray, he gave his disciples a prayer that takes 15 seconds to say. If we shall give an account of every careless word regardless of where we speak it, how

much more is that true of careless words, the sacrifice of fools, offered in the house of God? And the only remedy is to flee to his listening, his obedient speaking, to his sacrifice and his intercession. And we do that supreme in the house of God. In Word and Sacrifice and prayer.

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