

## **Ecclesiastes**

### **Lecture 9**

By [Rev. Kevin Chiarot](#)

This brings us to chapter 5, verses 4 through 7. We will look at this text under three headings: vows, dreams and the fear of God.

#### **Vows**

First, then, vows. Verse 4 says: when you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Remember, the context of this vow is not your private life, it is the house of God, and often the vows would be sealed with sacrifices, which were alluded to back in v. 1.

So the vows here are public, taken and witnessed in the house of God. They rest on the blood oath of the covenant established with Abraham, and renewed with Moses and fulfilled in the flesh of Jesus Christ. If you make a vow, the text says you should not delay in paying it. Obedience should be prompt. For God, we are told, has no pleasure in fools. Now, this has to be read carefully. God does suffer poor fools outside the church, and even those inside, with great indulgence. He is longsuffering and kind and patient. He is not easily provoked.

The person, or the fool, in view here is the one who vows solemnly in the house of God and then acts as if the vow, the oath, the covenant, and the blood on which it rests, are nothing. He profanes the blood of the covenant, and thus the Name of God, by treating the vow as a light thing. This person, God, who fills the sanctuary with his glorious and holy presence, takes no pleasure in. Here we should not count on his indulgence. What is at issue is the third commandment: Thou shall not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain. The result is, simply at the end of v.4, pay what you vow.

Notice the language of payment. A vow creates a debt. It calls God as a witness and binds you to its performance at the risk of his chastisement. This means that vows should be entered into only after much deliberation and prayer. They should be few and limited to solemn occasions. So serious is a vow that v.5 says: it is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. Proverbs 20:25 says: it is a snare to say rashly "it is holy" and to reflect only after making vows. The time for reflection is BEFORE the vow. If there is any doubt, it is much better to refrain. This need for sober reflection is the reason Jesus says:

don't swear by heaven or earth, don't swear by Jerusalem, don't swear in your own name, but rather let your yes be yes and your no be no.

Now, some have taken this to forbid all vows, but the context indicates that Jesus' is talking about vain and rash swearing. He is addressing an abuse of swearing lightly by heaven or earth or Jerusalem. Much like someone today might say "I swear to God" or "I swear on my mother's grave." That is vain and rash swearing, and in that context, the context of everyday life, don't proliferate vows, let your yes be yes and your no be no. But, on certain matters of weight and public importance vows are lawful. There are a number of reasons vows can't be wrong per se. First, God commands them in the Old Testament. That, by itself, means they can't be intrinsically immoral.

Second, Paul takes vows in the NT. He calls God as his witness in Rom 1:9 and 9:1. He does the same thing in Phil 1:8 and 2 Cor 1:13. When he has something momentous to say he makes a short vow, he takes an oath before God to impress his hearers of the truthfulness of his words.

Third, the very nature of the Christian life is public oath-bound service to God. We cannot explore this at length here, but let me say this: baptism is a sign, among other things, of your engagement to be the Lord's. It is a type of vow, resting on the prior action of Christ on our behalf.

The same is true of the Supper. It is an act of covenant renewal. It seals you into Christ and the New Covenant in his blood. Both sacraments publicly mark you off from the world. Thus, the very nature of the Christian life and, especially, Christian worship, is shaped by vows. First, the vow of baptism, and then the renewal of that vow at the Supper. That is why the sanctuary is a momentous place. That is why we draw near to listen rather than offer the sacrifice of fools. That is why the first and basic orientation lesson is: God is in heaven and you are on earth. This is why worship is to be sober and simple and restrained and reverent.

Back to our text: v.6 says: do not let your mouth lead you into sin. And here the sin in view is rash or light vowing. Don't let your words cheapen the Word. The text continues: don't say before the messenger that it was a mistake. This probably refers to the priest who would witness the vow and offer the appropriate sacrifice and then come and check on its performance. He is the messenger here. He comes to see about the payment of the vow and the person in view says "Oh, it was a mistake, I didn't really mean it, it was just some words, I was in a jam, or I didn't really know what I was doing."

This is the fool in whom God has no pleasure. Solomon is brutal in his appraisal of this kind of vain vow taking. Why should God be angry at your voice and destroy the work of your hands? God will require our vows from us. We will either be covenant keepers or covenant breakers, but we cannot escape the covenant.

To profane your vows is to place yourself in danger. It is to offer the sacrifice of fools. The text is saying: don't implicate God in your nonsense. He loves His people but He is the living and active God and He will guard the integrity of His sanctuary and His name.

Now it is gloriously true that, in the NC we can continue to flee to Christ. He will continually renew us in our baptismal vows and feed us at the Supper, if we repent. But we should not be presumptuous; we are still bound to Him who has first bound himself to us. And the NT is full of warning to professing Christians about the danger of complacency and disobedience. It is professing Christians who are warned in the book of Hebrews not to profane and trample the blood of Christ, not to insult and outrage the Spirit of grace.

It is professing Christians who are told: not to go on sinning willfully for there can come a point where there is no longer a sacrifice for sins. They are told: Vengeance is mine, I will repay and "the Lord will judge His people." Professing Christians are told: it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. So, Solomon's warning here is not a piece of OT theology that we can simply discard. The saints who persevere to the end are those who take THESE warnings with utter seriousness. They test themselves. They examine themselves. They remember their vows.

## **Dreams**

Our second point is dreams. Dreams are all the rage in some Christian circles, but we saw that Solomon takes a dim view of them, especially in the house of God. Verse 7: when dreams increase and words grow many, there is vanity. The problem with dreamers is they talk too much. Especially religious dreamers. They are chatterers.

Here we have a connection between multiplying words and trying to tell or divine the future. No one knows the future but God. Solomon was emphatic about that in chapter 3. And all we know of the future is what God has chosen to reveal in his Word. Thus, we have no need of dreamers and their babblings. They dream, then they talk about their dreams, and the result is, Solomon says vapor. Here he has a range of things in view.

Clearly seers with their visions, ecstatic states and mystical notions, their religious frenzy, Solomon sees as nothing but unreal illusions. False prophets with their superabundance of words, false spiritualities with their visions and trances, false dreamers with their verbose prayers, false teachers with their hazy discourses. All of this has no place in the house of God. For the preacher worship is simple, reverent, dignified and restrained. Word and Sacrament, prayer and the renewal of our vows. The rest is vanity.

## **Fear of God**

Finally, our third point is at the end of v.7: God is the one you must fear. This is the very beginning, the fountainhead of wisdom. God must be respected, His word must be honored, His vows upheld, His sacrifice magnified. There is thus to be a deep seriousness about God and his house. He is weighty. We and our words are vapor. Thus, we speak here only when we are spoken to.

Now it is true, wonderfully true, that God has drawn near to us in Christ. He has made us his children and called us into intimate fellowship with himself. But the God who has done so is the God of Israel, the same God who speaks here. Jesus is THIS God made flesh and, in Him, we come to the house of Yahweh. So this fear is real. God is to be feared. He is in heaven and you are on earth. But, and this is crucial, this is fully compatible with deep joy in worship, with celebration. Psalm 2 calls on the kings of the earth to rejoice WITH trembling. Joy and deep reverence, even trembling, go hand and hand.

In the book of Hebrews the writer tells us that we are not in the Old Covenant, we have not come to a mountain that could not be touched, to Sinai, we have not come to a blazing fire and gloom and darkness and tempest, we have not come to the terrifying sight which made even Moses tremble. But, he says, we have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, to a festal gathering of angels and saints, to Jesus and the blood of the new and better covenant. And what does he say after that? He says: see to it that you do not refuse him who is speaking. The OT saints rejected earthly messengers; we are now spoken to by the risen Christ from heaven.

The writer says if they, meaning Israel, did not escape when warned from earth, much less will we escape when warned from heaven. To whom much is given, much is required. And you have been given much, indeed all, in the NC. At Mount Sinai, the writer continues, God's voice shook the earth, but He will come and shake both the heavens and the earth in the future. He will shake everything that can be shaken, so that only the unshakeable kingdom of God remains. Everything else is vapor and it will vaporize. And the result the writer says is: we should offer our gratitude for receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken. He concludes by saying we should worship, in the festal assembly, in the joy of the NC, we should worship with reverence and awe, and the reason for this NC worship in reverence and awe is simple:

For our God, the God who has drawn near us in Christ, our God, is a consuming fire. In Christ you call Father the God whom Israel could not bear to speak to. So we need to listen up, to rejoice WITH trembling, to pay our vows and to fear God.

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