

When You Go to the House of God

Ecclesiastes 5:1 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.

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.

(Ecclesiastes 5:1-7)

When you Go to Church

A movie [short](#) called [James 3](#)¹ begins with [a man](#) waking up, obviously wishing he could go back to sleep. But he can't. He lethargically plops himself out of bed and then walks into the kid's bedroom to wake them up. He isn't happy and, though every scene save the last is a silent film, he yells something at them.

As they begin to awaken, they do things [kids](#) do. They head straight for the toys. They spill their breakfast and milk. They procrastinate. [Mom](#) is up now. She sees them and becomes exasperated. They won't put on the right clothes. They won't clean up after themselves. They won't get ready for the day. She's angry.

As they make their way to [the car](#), the kids slam the door behind them. No one is talking. The whole family is mad. They would all rather be anywhere but here. Dad starts driving like a maniac. Are they late or is he just taking it out of them? She hasn't even had time to put on her makeup on, and his driving causes her lipstick to smash into her face. She flies off the handle. Dad slams the breaks in total frustration,

¹ "James 3: A Story," *Desiring God* (March 31, 2013), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IO_9WvywnYg&ab_channel=DesiringGod.

muttering something underneath his breath. The car ride becomes the sound of silence.

Finally, they arrive at **their destination**. They get out, walking quickly over to the building. Then they come to those magical swinging glass doors. They enter. As their eyes meet their first friends, their **faces became enchanted**. Happiness and smiles take possession of them. In an instant, they are all talking and laughing. Soon, everyone sits down. *In their family's pew*. The *Doxology* begins. Mom is singing and smiling. Dad's eyes are closed, and his hands are raised in worship. The two kids? One's arms are folded in a closed body language. The other lips the words. Their hearts are not in it. **"Praise God from whom all blessings flow."**

Philip Ryken asks the pertinent question. **"Which is reality? Which is fantasy? And which is the real you? Is it the person who treats people badly at home or the person who acts nice to people in the house of God? When you go to worship, is it really worship, or are you just pretending?"**² Maybe he's created an either/or in his question. Or maybe he hasn't. Maybe it depends on the day or the week?

² Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2010), 119.

Ecclesiastes 5:1-8—Context and Structure

We are moving into a rather **different** but short section of Qohelet's sermon. In a book that feels mostly **mundane and secular**, I have used in the last several chapters a plethora of **songs** as a backdrop to the things seen under the sun by Ecclesiastes. But suddenly, what he sees moves squarely into what **he knows**. This is a drastic change, because what he knows moves out of the secular into full blown **religion and the temple worship** of Yahweh. As such, those things that have bound believer and unbeliever in their ability to diagnose things that are wrong in this world suddenly vanish like mist. They simply have nothing to say. How could they? They don't believe in God and do not love his worship.

Our passage comes as the center of **3:16-6:9**:

A. Evil in Society (3:16-4:12)

B. Power (4:13-16)

C. Cult (5:1-7)

B'. Power (5:8-9)

A'. Poverty-Wealth (5:10-6:9)³

³ **Naoto Kamano**, *Cosmology and Character: Qoheleth's Pedagogy from a Rhetorical-Critical Perspective*, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2002), 125. I modified her numbers to reflect the English numbering.

Some think it is [the very center of the book](#), though I believe there is more than one legitimate way to view that (see the next sermon), which can also put the center slightly later.

| | | | |
|--|-----------------|-----------------|-------------------------------|
| A. the brevity and insignificance of life | 1:2-2:26 | 1:2-3 | Frame |
| B. wisdom's failure to discover life's meaning | 1:12-2:26 | 1:4-11 | Cosmology (poem) |
| C. regarding time | 3:1-15 | 1:12-3:15 | Anthropology |
| D. fear God | 3:16-6:9 | 3:16-4:16 | Social critique I |
| C'. time revisited | 6:10-7:14 | 4:17-5:6 | Religious critique |
| B'. wisdom's failure revisited | 7:15-10:19 | 5:7-6:10 | Social critique II |
| A'. life's brevity revisited | 10:20-12:8 | 6:11-9:6 | Deconstruction |
| | | 9:7-12:7 | Ethic (concludes with a poem) |
| | | 12:8 | Frame |

When reading through Ecclesiastes 5, it seems pretty obvious that [vv. 1-7⁴](#) are a unit.

There are various ways of outlining what is before us. First, there is [the traditional outline](#) which helps you see the [linear progression](#) of thought:

- I. Guard your steps when you go to the house of God (v. 1a)
- II. Do not be rash with your mouth (v. 2a)
nor let your heart be quick to utter a word before God
- III. Do not delay fulfilling a vow you make to God (v. 4a)
- IV. Do not let your mouth lead you into sin (v. 6a)
and do not say before the messenger that it was a mistake⁵

⁴ The Hebrew numbering is different in the Masoretic and LXX. Hence, the same passage becomes [4:17-5:6](#).

⁵ [Sidney Greidanus](#), *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 125.

However, it can also be helpful to notice the ABA'B' or ABCA'B'C' relationship which divides the passage into two halves:

- | | |
|--|---|
| A. The temple and sacrifices (4:17) | A. Go to the house of God (1) |
| B. Words in the temple (5:1-2) | B. Be not rash with your mouth (2) |
| A'. The temple and vow (5:3-4) | C. Dreams and a multitude of words (3) |
| B'. Words in the temple (5:5-6) ⁶ | A'. Vow a vow to God (4-5) |
| | B'. Do not let your mouth lead you into sin (6) |
| | C'. Dreams and growing words (7) ⁷ |

Looking at it this way, as **words** in the temple **parallel words** in the temple, so **sacrifices** in the temple **parallel to making vows** to God.

We can also put the entire seven verses into an ABBA pattern (going through F) which centers on what God thinks of fools who walk into his sanctuary:

⁶ Kamano, 132.

⁷ Barnaby, "Ecclesiastes 5:1-7," *Biblical Chiasm Exchange* (April 20, 2016), <https://www.chiasmusxchange.com/2016/04/20/ecclesiastes-51-7/>. Lohfink flushes this out a little more saying, "The structure of the admonitory unit is artful. The sequence of 6 + 6 + 2 lines is repeated:

| | | | |
|--------|---------|---------------------------------|-------------|
| 4:17* | 6 lines | sacrifices | linkwords A |
| 5:1* | 6 lines | prayers | linkwords B |
| 5:2* | 2 lines | PROVERBLIKE SAYING ON DREAMS, 1 | |
| 5:3-4* | 6 lines | swearing oaths | linkwords A |
| 5:5* | 6 lines | rites of inadvertence | linkwords B |
| 5:6* | 2 lines | PROVERBLIKE SAYING ON DREAMS, 2 | |

Norbert Lohfink, *A Continental Commentary: Qoheleth* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 76.

- A. 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. (5:1)
- B. 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 (2)
- C. For a **dream** comes with much business (3a)
- D. and a fool's **voice** with many words (3b)
- E. When you **vow** a **vow** to God, do not delay **paying** it (4a)
- F. **for he has no pleasure in fools** (4b)
- E'. **Pay** what you **vow**. It is better that you should not **vow** than that you should **vow** and not **pay** (4b-5)
- D'. 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? (6)
- C'. For when **dreams** increase (7a)
- B'. and **words** grow many, there is vanity (7b)
- A'. but **God** is the one you must fear (7c)

At the end of the day, the passage, **like the short film**, is **a warning** to those who would approach God, be it publicly or privately, and do it with the utmost care and caution. This warning ends with “**fear.**” “**God is the one you must fear**” (7c). What does this mean? Some believe it means that we are **truly to be afraid** of God because he has the power to hurt a person.⁸ Most take this as the kind of fear that **deeply respects** the God in whose presence you are entering, not

⁸ August H. **Konkel** and Tremper **Longman III**, *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary, Vol 6: Job, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2006), 285–286; **Robert Steven Mavis**, *The Epilogue of Ecclesiastes and the Meaning of the Book*, PhD diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1999. (Cited by Konkel-Longman.)

taking him for granted, recognizing his might and majesty, acknowledging that he is in Heaven and we are on earth, that he is God but we are not.⁹ As the Psalmist says, “Who among the heavenly beings is like the Lord, a God greatly to be feared in the council of the holy ones, and awesome above all who are around him?” (Psalm 89:6–7). This is “the grand fundamental of godliness.”¹⁰ Which view is correct? Let’s look at the passage.

Warning: Drawing Near to God in Worship

Guard

The setting is given at the beginning, “Guard your steps when you go to the house of God” (Ecc 5:1). For our Preacher, the house of God is the temple. This was a structure built by Solomon himself, after the pattern of the tabernacle of Moses. The tabernacle and later temple were the Holy Places of all the earth, guarding the very presence special of God who dwelt between the cherubim.

Because God’s presence was here and because these structures emulated the spiritual realm of God’s heavenly

⁹ Ryken, 127.

¹⁰ Charles Bridges, *Ecclesiastes* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1998), 109.

presence where angels fall down before him, everything surrounding their construction and subsequent service to God was taken extremely seriously. For when God truly comes to a place, there is **dangerous holiness**. This is something the sons of Aaron, two men who had just been inducted into the priesthood in a lengthy and somber ceremony (**Lev 8-9**) to serve as the first priests of the tabernacle learned the hard way.

Nadab and Abihu had just seen **fire come out** from before the presence of the LORD in the Most Holy Place and it consumed the burnt offering on the altar. When the people saw it, they shouted and fell on their faces (**9:24**). But in the very next verse, these two men each took his censer and put fire in it, fire that had not been forbidden with a negative command, but fire that was nevertheless “**unauthorized**” (**10:1**) because it was a fire that they had kindled in **the dreams** of their own imaginations. As they went to offer their first ministerial duty in the tabernacle, **fire came out** once more from before the LORD and consumed them, and they died before Yahweh (**2**). That’s dangerous holiness.

Among the many remarkable things about this is that these two men had but **one job**. They were to “**serve**” (*ʿābad*)

and to “guard” (*shāmar*) the holy place (see **Num 18:1-7**). Curiously, these are the two jobs given to Adam in the Garden of Eden, which was the prototype sanctuary for the tabernacle and temple. Unfortunately, we can’t see this well in English, as the same words are translated there as something like, “work/tend and keep” (**Gen 2:15**). But they are always translated **serve and guard** in Leviticus. Since Eden, this has been the job of God’s priest. But like Nadab and Abihu, Adam **failed to guard** the sanctuary from evil, from impurity, from unholiness, from profanity ... from Satan, from his and his wife’s own **dreams and thoughts** about what worship should be like. **The works** (or might I say “fruit”?) **of his hands were brought to ruin**. And he was cast out of the Garden, along with his wife.

This becomes the backdrop for the first word (in both English and Hebrew) of **5:1**. “Guard.” “Guard your steps.” It is a command. It is actually the **first imperative in the entire sermon** given to someone other than himself (see **2:1**).¹¹ It is directed at his hearers. To **the original audience**, the Preacher is talking about guarding their steps as they enter the house of God, and if the Preacher is not talking to

¹¹ “Come” and “see” (ESV: “enjoy”) are the two imperatives in this verse, but they are given to himself. 1:10 has the only other imperative prior to “Guard.” But it is a general command directed at no one in particular.

priests, but to any Israelite who would dare to enter the holy place where God dwells, then this means that there is still a sense in which, for him, Israel and anyone turning to faith in his God, is still able to serve in some capacity as a **priest**. As it says, “**You are a nation of priests**” (**Ex 19:6**).

Things have both changed and not changed all that much in the subsequent years since the coming of Messiah. The radical separation of one place you had to go to be in God’s presence has been put away, for there is **no one “place” we go to worship** God now (**John 4:20-23**). Instead, we worship in S(s)pirit and in T(t)ruth (**John 4:24**).¹² Yet, **we still have a temple**, a house of God. It is Christ’s church, where his people come to worship him with living sacrifices. It is wherever we happen to be if we are in Christ, because all who know the Spirit of God are indwelt by him. And we do this, as Peter and John say, as a “**kingdom of priests**” (**1Pet 2:9; Rev 1:6; 5:10**). And so, these words are as applicable now as then. And they are words that the modern church with its frivolity and triviality must take much more seriously.

¹² Spirit would be the Holy Spirit; spirit would be in our own spirit, that means, with sincerity. Truth would be Christ (the Way, the Truth...); truth would be through God’s commands in Scripture. I believe all of these ideas are present in the original, hence, I put S(s)pirit and T(t)ruth.

Guard Your Ears: Listen

If the context is guarding ourselves when we come to God's house, then **how would he exhort us to do that?** The first way comes in the form of a proverb: “**To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they are doing evil**” (**Ecc 5:1**). Draw near *to listen*. There is no command here, but rather, hearers must use wisdom to understand why they should want to listen. Only the wise will really even care.

First of all, what is the opposite of listening? **Talking**. One uses ears. The other uses the mouth. It is extremely difficult to listen and talk at the same time. Some people never learn this wisdom, but are like the song “**Talk Talk**” from a band that must have been so dismayed at those who do nothing but this that they named themselves Talk Talk. More on that in a moment.

Second, if you are listening, then you must be hearing *someone else* talk. You do not come to God's house to listen to *yourself* talk. You come to hear *God* talk. **God talks to us** through two forms of his W(w)ord. The first is **his Son**, who is the Word of God. This includes the things he has made, the things he did in the flesh, and the things means of grace

he has given us to do. The second is through **the Scripture**, which is the word of God about the Son. The whole point here is that God is communicating to us when we draw near through the law and the gospel. Therefore, we must listen. You are not to listen to yourselves, be that **your own dreams** and imaginations or those of the church leadership, but to God's words and thus it is incumbent to guard yourselves that you might come to hear these. Do everything in your power to make this a priority.

The proverb continues by contrasting listening to God with offering the sacrifice of fools (**Ecc 5:1b**). What would be a **sacrifice of fools**? Some think it would be any kind of religious formalism.¹³ But it is better to see it as the Psalmist does: “In sacrifice and offering you have not delighted, but you have given me an open ear. Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required. Then I said, ‘Behold, I have come; in the scroll of the book it is written of me: I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart’” (**Ps 40:6-8**). In other words, it is coming without, as Micah says, a desire to **do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God** (**Micah 6:8**). This then is identical to **not guarding your steps** and **not coming to listen** to God.

¹³ **Tremper Longman**, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 150.

There are **two ways** this is possible. The first is that **you do not know God**. Rather, you come to church because you are **forced to**, or, because you are **fooled** into think that you know him when you do not. In neither case is that person guarding their steps. Rather, they are coming with precisely the opposite mentality. They come caring nothing about where they are or who they are approaching. They come out of **duty** or **vain imagination** or some kind of religious pretense. They may even come out of terror, believing that God is real, but being utterly afraid of him because they have not known his mercy. Either way, they do not come the way God has told them to, through the Son of God by faith—the only way to the Father.

These are the ones the Preacher tells us come “**not knowing that they are doing evil**” (**Ecc 5:1c**). What a **blind-side statement** this is, like a quarterback preparing to throw the bomb, not seeing the 275 lb. linebacker breathing down his neck, like an unsuspecting driver entering the busy intersection at full speed, not realizing he has just run a red light. Those who come to church not knowing Christ, having not trusted in him, against their will or through their own imagined means, are committing evil. God does not want people just showing up and filling chairs and pews.

These are the people who like to think of evil as something outside of them (if they even think evil exists at all). **They know not** that *they* are evil, that these actions are evil, that coming church without humbling themselves and guarding their steps, without wanting or caring to listen to God is **an evil thing**. Woe to such men or women, boys or girls.

At yet, sometimes, by God's grace, a person can hear this very truth for the first time. **God even in such words often reaches out** to such as these and through the power of his word and the death it brings, even if they are not coming with such motives, he breaks in as he wills and arrests them, convicts them, humbles them, and then brings them back to life, drawing them to himself so that they might be forgiven of such transgression through Christ. He does this through his powerful word alone, which is precisely what we are listening to now. And so this warning is **not meant to anger you**, to drive you even further away, but to break you of your pride that you might recognize the evil of your ways, repent, and be saved.

But there is **another kind of person here**. This is the person we began the sermon with. As Derek Kidner puts it, this 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.”¹⁴ Ryken nails it when he says, “In other words, the Preacher is speaking to just about everyone who ever goes to church.”¹⁵ We all have our moments, those times when we forget this evil, when we do not guard our steps, when we do not see with spiritual eyes the presence of God in the midst of his house, when the troubles or wonders of the world cause us not to listen to God, but to our ourselves.

Sometimes, kids, it is your parents who love God who do this. Sometimes it is even your pastor. Sometimes, entire churches do this together as led into gross sin by the pastors and teachers. This taking God for granted is a great evil because “we have despised the gospel of the cross and the empty tomb”¹⁶ along with its power in both this world and the next. That’s precisely why it is so evil. I must wonder, did the Apostle have this very passage in mind when he said, “And *walk in love*, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and *sacrifice to God* ... Let there be no filthiness nor *foolish talk* nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving” (Eph 5:2, 4).

¹⁴ Derek Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1976), 52.

¹⁵ Ryken, 120.

¹⁶ Ryken, 121.

Guard Your Mouth

If **guarding first begins with your ears**, so that you might hear and know, as the Preacher does, who this God is that you are approaching, the second way you guard your steps is by **guarding your mouth**. I said we would come back to this, as some people just talk talk talk. Essentially, the rest of our passage is taken up with this idea, reminding me of **James**, who has so much to say about the tongue. The instruction begins with the “**Be not rash with your mouth**” (**Ecc 5:2**). This is followed by four stages: a word, a dream, a voice, and a vow. These are followed in reverse order by a vow, a voice, a dream, and a word. These four things will be what he means by being rash with your mouth.

First, do not “**let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God**” (**2b**). This is parallel at the end of the verse by, “**Therefore let your words be few.**” Or as James says, “**be quick to hear, slow to speak**” (**James 1:19**). Why? The middle, “**For God is in heaven and you are on earth.**” So what is this talking about? It likely refers **to prayer**, though it is interesting that some of the Fathers said this referred to

talking theologically about God.¹⁷ It may insinuate badgering God with superfluous babble. If so, Jesus has something to say about that. “When you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him” (Matt 6:7-8). We’ve all heard these people with their flowery oratory impressing men in prayer and clearly thinking they are impressing God. We’ve all heard people theologize about things they clearly do not understand. It’s absurd. Who do they think they are? God is in heaven and they are peons on earth.

Some of the Jews (including the targum) interpreted it as speaking harsh things towards God or saying few things to avoid making a mistake. Thus, they, like perhaps some of the Christian tradition, said it is best to pray only in the words of the liturgy—just to be careful. I understand the

¹⁷ Evagrius of Puntos, “He is not so much talking about prayer at this point as issuing a command not to theologize thoughtlessly. Indeed, anyone who belongs to this material world and whose thoughts have their origin in this world cannot speak about God without error—or on other matters that elude the senses.” (*Scholia on Ecclesiastes* 35.5.1-2. “[It might be that] a person dedicates himself rashly, without comprehending what is esoteric of the wisdom of God and of the Word who is “in the beginning with God” and who is himself God. And ... it is by means of the Word and God and by means of the wisdom with him that one must examine and discover these things. [Then] it must happen that he, by falling into myths and nonsense and fictions, submits himself to the danger that surrounds impiety. For that reason one must remember also the commandment from Solomon in Ecclesiastes concerning such things, which says, “Do not hasten to express a word before the face of God. For God is in the heaven above, and you are on the earth below. Therefore let your words be few.” (Origen, *Fragments on Jeremiah* 1.1).

sentiment, but that is putting a fence around prayer. How can one pray continually and yet say virtually nothing? I think of the widow in the parable of the unjust judge who kept **pestering the king** with but a few words, “**Give me justice against my adversary**” (Luke 18:3). Finally, he granted her petition so that she would **not beat him down with relentless coming** (5). How much more will God, who is our Father and not a wicked judge, hear our prayers when we come to him. Yet, the point is, our words are to be few so that we might **remember who we are talking to**, so that we might **humble our mouths** (Theodore of Tabennesi) and so that when we speak to him, they might have meaning and come from our hearts.

Second, we come to **dreams**. “**For a dream comes with much business**” (Ecc 5:3a). I’ve mentioned dreams several times already, on purpose, to foreshadow this even as helping us see how men often come to God using their own vain imaginations. Here, dreams are related to the (prayerful-theological) words of the previous verse, as there is a “**for**” that begins it. Thus, it is possible that the dream state is driving the *many words* of the fool. This certainly seems to fit the third point which immediately follows, “**... and a fool’s voice with many words.**” Beware of bringing

your own dreams into God's house. This isn't about you, but him. And remember, God's house these days isn't just church, but wherever *you* are.

But what is **the meaning of this dream**? The other three ideas are clearly all related to **the mouth**. So it would seem to me that the dream must cause this foolish worshiper to be **making things up about God** that come out in the form of prayers or teaching. Perhaps it is something like Jeremiah who said the false prophets “**make my people forget my name by their dreams that they tell one another ... Let the prophet who has a dream tell the dream, but let him who has my word speak my word faithfully**” (**Jer 23:27-28**).

The dream is also related to “**business**,” which would appear to be **work**, which the Preacher spent a long time discussing in ch. 2. Perhaps an idea is that a preoccupation with work creates a dream-state when someone goes to worship, so that they end up being foolish in their worship, hearing only themselves in their own head rather than God. It's called being preoccupied with other things. This is not incompatible with false prophets, but extends beyond them. Some believe this may refer to going to worship (offering a sacrifice) in order **to receive a dream revelation from God**. This was a pagan practice, and it is one that certain sects of

Christianity practice today. Many of these thoughts remind me of the Charismatic infatuation with speaking in **tongues** and giving **prophecies** in church. Perhaps the Preacher saw some similar things that we see today?

Third, is the **voice**. As mentioned a moment ago, “**A fool’s voice with many words.**” It seems enough here to say that “**voice**” is parallel to “**word**” from the previous verse, because in both instances, few and many words are parallel. But rather than a specific kind of word, such as a **prayer**, perhaps this includes these other kinds of ideas such as **theologizing** about things we know nothing about, making **prophecies** in the name of God when we have not actually heard from God, speaking **babble and jibborish**, or **flowery eloquence meant to impress**, any of which can have at their root a fool’s approach to worshiping the God of heaven.

By far, the most time is taken up with the fourth idea: **vows**. The word appears **five times in two verses**. “**When you *vow* a *vow* to God, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you *vow*. It is better that you should not *vow* than that you should *vow* and not pay**” (4-5). The **center** of the entire passage comes here: **he has no pleasure in fools**. Now the **lack of hearing** that was a sign of a **fool** is explicitly tied to the **rash words of the fool**.

A **vow** is obviously a **very specific kind of word** that is said with the mouth. This is a near-quotation of **Deuteronomy 23:21-23**. “When you make a vow to the LORD your God, do not put off fulfilling it, for the LORD your God will require it of you, and you will have incurred guilt; whereas you incur no guilt if you refrain from vowing. You must fulfill what has crossed your lips and perform what you have voluntarily vowed to the LORD your God, having made the promise with your own mouth” (cf. Num 30:2). The difference is, Deuteronomy talks about **guilt**, while Ecclesiastes warns against **folly** and the damage that reneging on vows can cause.¹⁸

Making **vows you plan to keep** is obviously important. One of the biggest lessons learned the hard way in the Scripture comes from Jephthah who made a very stupid vow to the LORD when he said, “If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, then whatever comes out from the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the Ammonites shall be the LORD’s, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering” (**Jdg 11:30-31**). God fulfilled his end. Then Jephthah’s daughter walked out of his house; he sacrificed her.

¹⁸ **Michael V. Fox**, *Ecclesiastes*, The JPS Bible Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), 33.

It is important here to say that this **still has meaning and application today**. I wish I didn't have to say that, but unfortunately, I do. Long ago, I learned that many Evangelicals believe that making vows and taking oaths is contrary to the NT. Therefore, they would see this as irrelevant. Where do they get this? From Jesus' **Sermon on the Mount**. **"But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black"** (**Matt 5:34-36**).

Men who are otherwise **solid Calvinistic** thinkers (but not Reformed), have said things like, **"It must be frankly admitted that here Jesus formally contravenes OT law: what it permits or commands (Deut 6:13), he forbids."**¹⁹ Another says that Jesus has in these words **"abrogated"** taking vows.²⁰ We are not to do it at all. This is an

¹⁹ **D. A. Carson**, "Matthew," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 154. He adds, **"But if his interpretation of the direction in which the law points is authoritative, then his teaching fulfills it."** **Don Garlington**, in "Oath-Taking In the Community of the New Age (**Matthew 5:33-37**)," *Trinity Journal* 16:2 (Fall 1995): 138-70 cites Carson approvingly.

²⁰ **Fred Zaspel**, *"New Covenant Theology and the Mosaic Law,"* 10, <https://theologue.files.wordpress.com/2014/10/nct-mosaiclaw-fredzaspel.pdf>. The exact quote, **"The whole of the law may be viewed as being taken up into Christ and given His new and authoritative interpretation... With some details of the law the "fulfillment" will entail extension or even addition (vv.21-22, 27-28). With some details the fulfillment will involve restriction (vv.38-39) or even abrogation (vv.31-32, 33-34)."** His reference to this text means that Jesus abrogated *this* law. For more, see **my sermon** "I Pledge Allegiance," RBCNC.com

inexplicable exegesis given two facts. First, Jesus himself begins this very sermon saying, “**Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them**” (Matt 5:17). How can someone say Jesus is abolishing the law when he said that isn’t what he was doing? Second, there are many oaths taken throughout the NT!

It is better to see Jesus as forbidding taking oaths or vows **with no intention of paying them**. Hendriksen explains the cunning and guile of the Pharisees regarding the choice and emphasis of their words in taking oaths, vows, and swearing. It is an emphasis on *emphasis*, not on the words themselves. The wrong *emphasis* on the wrong syllable.

God’s intent: *You shall not swear by my name falsely.*

Pharisaical reading (P.R.): You shall not swear *by the name* falsely.

God’s intent: When a man makes a vow to Jehovah or swears an oath... *he shall not break his word.*

P.R.: When a man makes a vow *to Jehovah* or swears an oath... he shall not break his word.

(Oct 15, 2006), <https://uploads.documents.cimpress.io/v1/uploads/ebadea5b-28a6-4ebd-a5e6-d6b07140f01f~110/original?tenant=vbu-digital>.

God's intent: When you shall make a vow to Jehovah your God, *you shall not be slack to pay it.*

P.R.: When you shall make *a vow to Jehovah* your God, you shall not be slack to pay it.²¹

This **shift in emphasis** allowed the Scribes to bifurcate the one law on being truthful in swearing oaths into greater and lesser kinds of oath taking. What he did was say that you *could* swear an oath in God's name if you were *really* serious (like a kid does when he says, “**cross my heart, hope to die, stick a needle in my eye.**” That's how one kid knows that the other kid is *really* serious). If you did this, the Law said you *had* to fulfill it. That's why he said you should only do this if you were serious.

But, he reasoned, you could also **swear an oath by something less** than the name of God, something like “earth” or “Jerusalem” or “his own head.” If he did this, then he was **not so obligated to keep his oath**, because (according to him) the Law didn't say anything about that. Perhaps this accounts for why the Jews began to develop a superstition

²¹ **William Hendriksen** and Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, vol. 9, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953–2001), 307.

against mentioning the name of God. It allowed them to break their oaths!

In daily conversation oaths began to multiply ‘by heaven’ and ‘by the earth’ and ‘by Jerusalem’ and ‘by the temple,’ and ‘by the altar.’ In order to make an impression a person might utter such an oath, ‘talking big’ and dispensing enormous promises. If the affirmation which he had made was a lie or if the promise was never even meant to be kept, that was not so bad, as long as he had not sworn ‘to the Lord.’²²

So yes, the taking of vows is still acceptable in NT times. And so **the point remains**. If you make a vow, *pay it*. Why? The central reason, as I’ve said, is because the one who does not do that is **a fool**. But **why is he a fool?** We now work our way out of the passage, first with the vow: “**It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay**” (**Ecc 5:5**). **Why?**

It is **letting your mouth lead you into sin**. “**Let not your mouth lead you into sin**” (**6a**). How? First, there is a very interesting thing that follows which explains the **how** at least in part. This must also be read in light of the

²² Hendriksen, 307-08.

Deuteronomy allusion. Then, he explains **why** this is so terrible.

“And do not say before the messenger that it was a **mistake**” (6b). Your “mistake” leads you into sin. **What does this saying mean?** Some say that in these days “**there were people whose duty it was to check up on those who had not fulfilled their public vows, a kind of religious bill collector.**”²³ This office is not found in Scripture, and where the targum says these were **priests**, the midrash says they were someone else. We just don’t know. The point here is that “the messenger” in this case would be this person. And if you didn’t pay your vow, you would get into big trouble.

However, many have taken “messenger” to refer to **an angel**. Some call it the angel who records everyone’s words (Ibn Ezra). Others say it is the angel of death.²⁴ The targum calls him the “**severe**” or “**mighty**” angel “who rules over you.” Interestingly, the LXX reads “God.”²⁵ What if this refers to the Angel of the LORD, the one who is given judgment in the NT? Jesus Christ.²⁶ Read this in light of

²³ Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 154.

²⁴ See Fox, 34.

²⁵ This is how almost all who comment on this put it. However, the LXX actually reads, “the FACE of God.” And the Face of God is an anthropometric title for the Angel of the LORD. See Matt Foreman and Douglas Van Dorn, *The Angel of the LORD: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Study* (Dacono, CO: Waters of Creation Publishing, 2020), 80.

²⁶ “Others, understand it of Christ, who is the searcher of hearts, and will not be mocked, cannot be deceived; who is the Angel of the Covenant, and who is in the midst of his people, his

Deuteronomy. “For the LORD your God will require it of you, and you will have incurred guilt; whereas you incur no guilt if you refrain from vowing.”

Now comes the truly brutal warning. “Why should God be angry at your voice *and destroy the work of your hand?*” (6c). God judges those who make vows and do not pay them. Why? Because **he takes words very seriously**. We today are **mockers of words**. We play **fast and loose** with them. Our **slang** takes words (like “wicked” or “bad” or “awesome”) and robs them of their meaning by making them mean the opposite (wicked means great; bad means good; awesome is used for things that are totally normal). God does not do this, because words are a reflection of his nature, even of the Second Person of the Trinity. When we make vows, we use words. When we use words and have no intention of following through with them, we mock words. We therefore mock The Word. And it makes God angry. This verse shows you **his power and his holiness and his justice**. And it is terrifying.

Candlesticks, when they come to worship, Exod. 23.20,21. called the presence of God, exod. 33.14. Mal. 4.1. Isa. 63.9. John 12. 41. It seems to me to have some allusion to the history of Balaam, who when the Angel stood in the way against him, made such an excuse as this, It was an error, I knew not thou stood against me, if it displeased thee, I will go back, Numb. 22.34.” **Edward Reynolds**, *Annotations on The Book of Ecclesiastes* (London: J. Streater, 1669), 163-64.

The last verse finishes out our four: “For when *dreams* increase and *words* grow many, there is vanity” (7a). The *vanity* is seen by everything he has been warning us about. They display foolishness. They display lack of respect. They display mockery. They put self on the throne. This is emptiness. This is vapor. This is mist. This is vanity. This all centers on guarding our ways when you approach the God of heaven.

Fear God: A Lesson from Solomon’s Prayer of Dedication

If this passage truly is *the center of Ecclesiastes*, then the last line is the climax of the book in terms of central messages. It also happens to line up perfectly with the very ending of the book. “But God is the one you must fear” (7b). Earlier I asked, what kind of fear is this? Is it *terror*? Or is it deep *respect* and not taking him for granted? My answer is, yes. But it depends on who you are.

If you are a person who flippantly *waltzes into worship*, if you are a person who enters into worship without a heart made right by the Holy Spirit of God, if you are a person who has come here and you have not bowed your knee to

God, then you had better understand that you had better be terrified of this God. As Jesus said, “I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!” (Luke 12:5). For you have no mediator to keep this God at bay. You truly are a sinner in the hands of an angry God. And woe to you for hearing the good news and not heeding it.

If you are among the rest of us, those who forget from time to time or have not yet learned as a Christian who you worship when you come into God’s presence—indeed, you are always in God’s presence as a Christian and so how much more seriously does this make all our sin?—if this is you, then it is time that you hear anew about who this God is and why you must respect him and approach him as God while you are but a man. You should not fear his brute unmitigated power, yet he is a God who disciplines those he loves. And for the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant (Heb 12:11).

To show you this, I want to take you though a remarkable parallel to this passage which is found on the lips of the one that many of us think wrote Ecclesiastes. These are the words of king Solomon as he dedicated the temple. The setting is the same in both places: the house of God.

There is a parallel for every single segment of our text in his prayer dedicating the temple, save the dreams. The remarkable thing about that is how his entire entry into wisdom came to Solomon because God appeared to him in a dream. Not a dream *of his imagination*, but a real revelation of God himself to the boy, when he was still of a tender age to heed the words.

Heed the wise and unfoolish approach Solomon has to God. He in fact **emulates** for you what it should look like for you to enter God's presence.²⁷ The king has a deep respect for God's **house**, for **listening**, for **praying**, for what he says with his **words**, and most of all, for God's forgiveness when people break their **vows**. He knows that this kindness and mercy of God leads men to the proper **fear** of the Lord. And he prays all this in his prayer. I will take it out of order of the prayer and rearrange it to the order of Ecclesiastes so that you may see and hear the wisdom of the Preacher.²⁸

“O LORD, God of Israel,” May your eyes “be open night and day toward **this house**, the place of which you have said, ‘My name shall be there,’ that you may listen to the prayer

²⁷ This is a main reason I do not buy the argument that Ecclesiastes is some kind of a secular Jew who has virtually no spiritual compass and that supposedly this man had little personal knowledge of God. I think this is badly misreading the book.

²⁸ For a side-by-side comparison, see the Appendix at the end of the sermon.

that your servant offers toward this place ... You spoke with your mouth, and with your hand have fulfilled it this day. Have regard to the prayer of your servant and to his plea, O LORD my God, listening to the cry and to the prayer that your servant prays before you this day, and listen to the plea of your servant and of your people Israel, when they pray toward this place. And listen in heaven your dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive.

“O LORD, God of Israel, there is no God like you, in heaven above or on earth beneath ... But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built!

“If a man sins against his neighbor and is made to take an oath and comes and swears his oath before your altar in this house ... then hear in heaven and act and judge your servants, condemning the guilty by bringing his conduct on his own head, and vindicating the righteous by rewarding him according to his righteousness ... If they sin against you—for there is no one who does not sin—and you are angry with them ... then hear in heaven your dwelling place and forgive and act and render to each whose heart you know, according to all his ways (for you, you only, know the hearts of all the children of mankind) ... that they may

fear you all the days that they live in the land that you gave to our fathers ... hear in heaven your dwelling place and do according to all for which the foreigner calls to you, in order that **all the peoples of the earth** may know your name **and fear you**, as do your people Israel, and that they may know that this house that I have built is called by your name.

Solomon knew the truth and came back to it at the end of his days. We have this truth made **more sure** and certain through the **changes that have come in Christ**. Because of it, there is no better way to conclude than with the exhortation of another preacher, the author of Hebrews, when he says, “Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water” (**Heb 10:19–22**).

Appendix: Ecclesiastes 5:1-7 and Solomon's Prayer of Dedication Harmonized

Fear God (Ecc 5:1-7)

5 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.

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**.

Solomon's Prayer of Dedication (1Kgs 8:22-53)

29 that your eyes may be open night and day toward **this house**, the place of which you have said, 'My name shall be there,' that you may listen to the prayer that your servant offers toward this place.

24 ... **You spoke with your mouth**, and with your hand have fulfilled it this day.

28 Yet **have regard to the prayer of your servant and to his plea**, O LORD my God, listening to the cry and to the prayer that your servant prays before you this day,

30 And **listen to the plea of your servant** and of your people Israel, when they pray toward this place. And listen in heaven your dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive.

23 and said, "O LORD, God of Israel, there is no God like you, **in heaven above or on earth beneath ...** **27** "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built!

31 "If a man sins against his neighbor and **is made to take an oath and comes and swears his oath** before your altar in this house,

32 then hear in heaven and **act and judge your servants, condemning the guilty by bringing his conduct on his own head**, and vindicating the righteous by rewarding him according to his righteousness.

46 "If they sin against you—for there is no one who does not sin—and **you are angry with them ...** **39** then hear in heaven your dwelling place and forgive and act and **render to each whose heart you know**, according to all his ways (for you, you only, know the hearts of all the children of mankind),

3:5 At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon in **a dream by night**, and God said, "Ask what I shall give you." (Compare 1Kg 3:6-7 with 1Kg 8:23-26)

40 **that they may fear you** all the days that they live in the land that you gave to our fathers ...

43 hear in heaven your dwelling place and do according to all for which the foreigner calls to you, in order that **all the peoples of the earth** may know your name **and fear you**, as do your people Israel, and that they may know that this house that I have built is called by your name.

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