

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

SERMON SERIES: An Exercise in Futility

(studies in Ecclesiastes)

The Vanity of Religion

(selected passages from Ecclesiastes)

Study #6

Introduction: My shortcut to atheism...

I have many fond memories of many aspects of growing up with my family. Among the fondest of those fond memories are of times at church. Every Sunday our family would pile into the car and drive the few minutes to the church in which we were very heavily involved.

My twin sister and I attended Sunday School and worship services without fail. With a pipe organ and very formal and very large choir, our church of several thousand people was known for a stirring music ministry. The senior minister had a well-recognized involvement with Alcoholic Anonymous. Ours was one of the more influential churches in Dallas.

I liked church. My friends were there. The church scheduled cool events for kids and youth at every stage of our developing years. Church was one of the glues that held my world together as a young person.

And then, along about the time I became aware that different people had different ways of looking at things and as I began to read more widely and as I was being exposed to a variety of world views, I began to think my own thoughts about the One Thing that church was supposed to be all about.

Around the age of twelve or thirteen, I started questioning the existence of God. Or maybe what I was questioning was His relevance. Did He matter? At any rate, I wondered, “*Is God real?*”

As those thoughts began to percolate more and more, I became a committed atheist for about a three to four year period of my adolescence.

Now, while all sorts of factors play a role in something as complex as a youth aged 13-16 disbelieving in God, I’m very convinced that a major part of my drift into atheism was the disconnect between my church experience and God.

I even remember thinking, “*If God isn’t much of a part of church (and, to this day I still think that He wasn’t), then there must not be much to this whole ‘God’ thing.*”

If it is true in life, generally, that “*the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing,*” then the main thing for churches and Christians has to be to KEEP GOD FRONT AND CENTER. And that one thought brings us to one specific passage in the book of Ecclesiastes.

To this point, I’ve been picking and choosing verses from the book that contribute to whatever theme I’m developing. Today, there is one major passage that speaks directly to the issue of worship and GOD, and it is found near the middle of the book.

The thoughts contained in 5:1-7 are not the musings of a cynic. This is practical, meat-and-potatoes spirituality for life in the real world. And, in the short span of seven verses Solomon tells us how we should approach God in worship, and what are the essentials of a worship that connects with Him and that pleases Him.

His first words are a warning to “*guard our steps.*” And by this warning, he sets the tone for everything else he has to say.

As You Prepare To Worship (vv. 1-3)

Attention! (v. 1)

Guard your steps

[5:1a] Guard¹ your steps as you go to the house of God...

¹ Guard: To pay close attention to the obligations of a covenant, or to give something one’s full and undivided attention.

Usually, when the word “guard” is used in the Bible, it has to do with how a shepherd tends to his sheep.

The shepherd guarded the sheep so that they didn’t fall victim to predatory animals; he would guard them so that they didn’t stray into dangerous places. His safe-guarding provided them with food and shelter.

Ana all of Solomon’s audience would have been familiar with the activity of the shepherd. They knew what he meant when he said, “*Guard your steps.*” He meant “shepherd” your steps so that you stay in line, protect your heart, stay out of danger.

However, since not many of us here today are shepherds, maybe we could take a minute and try to think of a 2008 equivalent to shepherding...

In today’s business culture, whose job is it to keep the company on track, keep it out of quagmires, make sure that the main thing remains the main thing? It’s the AUDIT DEPARTMENT!

The auditors are the people who keep the company in line with what its stated priorities are. They are the organization’s shepherds. They keep the business on track, out of danger, and on the main business at hand.

And as you make preparations to come to the place of worship, you are to **AUDIT** yourself.

Your feet will be only too quick to stray off the path if they are not guarded. You might forget why you’ve come to church. You might get distracted. Only by carefully guarding your feet (and your eyes and your hearts) will you accomplish the understood goal of keeping the main thing the main thing.

As we have come to worship with great care we are given an action item, one that may seem to be an INaction item. We are told to **listen**.

Draw near to listen

[5:1b]... draw near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools; for they do not know they are doing evil.

Kathy and I can hear the traffic on 1604 at all hours of the day and night from our house. But we have gotten used to it. We have a clock that chimes on the quarter, half, three quarter and hour. I rarely ever hear it. I’m used to living with a certain level of noise.

All of us are bombarded with sound all day long. Rarely are things around us quiet. I mean **REALLY** quiet. There is always noise. And because of this constant audible stimulation, we Americans have become quite skilled at hearing without listening.

But when we come to the place of worship, we are to actively LISTEN.

Now, please don’t misunderstand what Solomon is saying, or what I am saying. This is not a preacher’s ploy to get you to stay awake during a sermon!

Think about it. You haven’t come to church to hear what I have to say. You’ve come to church because of a hunger and a thirst for God. You want to be mainly about the main thing. And the main thing is God.

So, during our time of worship, STAY ALERT! Enter fully into the singing. Listen attentively to news and updates about life in the church during announcements, give thoughtfully, listen as a testimony is given or as you hear a missionary speak. Listen to whoever is bringing the message from the Word, because you can hear God’s message through the Word preached.

You can sleep later! Don’t daydream. Draw near to listen.

I won’t pretend for a moment that everything I have to say is the most interesting, intriguing, provocative or entertaining remark you have ever heard.

But, Solomon says that if you come with your path set to meet with God and your ears tuned to listen, you will hear His message.

And Solomon’s not finished. Going counter to the flow of much of our thinking today (and perhaps of his own day) he tells us that there is a right way and a wrong way to engage in the very private, intimate act of prayer.

Don't Talk Thoughtlessly (v. 2)

[5:1b]...draw near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools; for they do not know they are doing evil. [5:2a] Do not be hasty in word or impulsive in thought to bring up a matter in the presence of God...

Watch your words and your thoughts...

These days we're always being encouraged to pray. Even to pray a lot!

Solomon says, *"Not so fast... Don't say things - don't even think them - too quickly in prayer. Your words should be few, brief, and to the point when you address God. Don't be hasty. Don't give free reign to your lips as you pray."*

And Solomon doesn't stutter when he describes the ones who are too mouthy in prayer, who start praying as if they are talking to a neighbor, who barge into a worship setting as if it were a PTA meeting.

He says that to speak in God's presence without thought is **foolish**.

The words of the praying person before God should be few - a few, well-chosen, reverent words, where we express what is in our minds and on our hearts. That's the best and most God-honoring route to travel.

Whether in public or private worship; in a setting like this, or in a private time with God, there is only one way to successfully guard your lips and your mind in the presence of God - and that is to remember the main thing: GOD.

Watch your God

[5:2b]...For God is in heaven and you are on the earth; therefore let your words be few.

In the ancient world, when a subject had an audience with the king, that subject was given one piece of advice: *"Speak when spoken to."*

Today, many of us get butterflies in our stomachs when we speak with someone who is powerful. We worry about whether we are saying the right things or coming across in the right way. And even if we're not nervous when we talk to the boss, we're careful about what we say and how we say it.

Solomon wants us to consider much more carefully what we have to say to God than what we have to say to our boss or to an internationally acclaimed actor or actress, or to a high-ranking government official.

Try this experiment next time you begin praying: Try reminding yourself, not that you are about to start praying, but that you are about to start talking to GOD!

And this comment about God being in heaven and our being on the earth is a statement of *perspective*, not of *distance*. It is not because He is so far away that we should not talk too much - as if the long-distance charges might be piling up.

It is because God is in the realm of the infinite. He hears the inaudible. He sees the invisible. He performs the impossible. The very fact that He is who He is requires that we weigh our words carefully when speaking with Him.

One of the great marvels of Christianity is that God has come near. In Jesus Christ, God became one of us. He is imminent (close by; accessible) - and that is amazing.

But the fact of God's imminence is stupendous because of the obvious fact of His transcendence. And it is possible to forget God's transcendence, that he is above us in every way.

Solomon wants us to always remember that God is, while imminent, wholly separate from us (that is what "holy" means), majestic.

By what we read here in Ecclesiastes, Solomon's **NOT** really placing time or word limits on our prayers. Everything that you have heard about God loving to listen to you pray is true - and the reminders to pray scattered throughout the Bible are abundant proof of that. God simply wants our prayers to be thoughtful, sincere, worshipful.

A bit of advice comes our way in verse three that we find in many other places in the Bible. The meaning may not be immediately clear here, so we'll think about it for a minute.

Be Still (v. 3)

[5:3] For the dream comes through much effort and the voice of a fool through many words.²

Can you hear the tiredness in those words? The central thought is pretty apparent: *“Slow down. You are in God’s presence. Breathe deeply and rest in His presence.”*³

There is a well-known phrase from the psalms, **“Cease striving/Be still and know that I am God.”** (Psalm 46:10) that echoes what Solomon is saying, here.

Eugene Peterson takes a running start and then renders the phrase in modern terms in The Message:

*“Attention, all! See the marvels of God!
He plants flowers and trees all over the earth,
Bans war from pole to pole,
Breaks all the weapons across His knee.
Verse 10 - “STEP OUT OF THE TRAFFIC!
Take a long,
loving look at Me, your High God,
above politics, above everything.”*⁴

I have to confess how challenging this is to me, personally.

² Bible scholars tell us that the thought behind this verse is that troubling dreams come to those who are troubled with life, and are full of anxieties.

³ I’ve heard it put this way: When our souls are churning like a raging ocean, God’s truth doesn’t drop anchor.

⁴ As author John White says in his book, The Fight, *“It is God who wishes to establish communication. He is more anxious to speak to us than we are to hear Him. He is incredibly persistent in trying to get through. Our real problem is that we tend to avoid hearing Him.”*

I often, especially of late, have found it terrifically difficult to consciously calm my spirit for a time in prayer. It is a battle to be still, to reflect, to ponder, to meditate, to muse.

I desperately want to listen for the nudges and impressions that God may want to give me, but I’m often frustrated by my own inability to REST and to keep my own heart on track.

And, after conversations with many, many people, I discover that I’m not alone in this. Many of us struggle here. We are so busy, torn, pulled, pushed, prodded, pressured and rushed that the still, small voice of God is all but pushed aside.

Solomon says that if we would approach God in a way that is worthy of Him, we would do so with spirits at rest. We will *“step out of the traffic”* of daily life; we will be still; we will remember the Main Thing.

King Solomon’s advanced seminar in worship continues. Having addressed the heart preparation necessary for worship and having given some instruction on prayer, he next tells us about making promises to God.

I Promise... (5:4-6)

By All Means - Make Vows to God!

Isn’t it interesting that Solomon just seems to assume that people are going to make vows to God?

Promises (or “vows”) are seeds for action, so he doesn’t view these vows as negative. They are positive. He doesn’t say “if” but “when” you make vows to God.

In the Old Testament, there were several types of vows that a person might make to God.

There was the Nazirite vow (This is the one that was imposed on Samson). Nazirites were forbidden to cut their hair, to drink of the fruit of the vine, and were prohibited from touching anything unclean.⁵

⁵ Usually these were vows taken for a short period of time; in Solomon’s case, he was under the Nazirite vow for life. In a wonderful passage in Jeremiah 35, the

Other biblical vows included the promise to sacrifice an animal, the promise to give to God certain free-will offerings, or the commitment to consecrate a life to God.

Jesus talked about making vows to God. The Apostle Paul made at least one vow we know of in the book of Acts,⁶ and believers through the centuries have made a practice of promising certain things to God.

So, let's not think that the idea of making promises to God is a strictly Old Testament practice!

In our own day, we make vows (to God and to human witnesses) when we get married, when we give testimony in court, when parents bring a child forward at a baby dedication.

So, Solomon is big on vows. But, making a vow is only half of the deal. Promises made to God are to be kept.

By All Means - Pay What You Vow to God!!

Fulfill your vows to God (v. 4)

[5:4] When you make a vow to God, do not be late in paying it; for He takes no delight in fools. Pay what you vow!

This is a command. God expects you to keep promises you make to Him.

When you tell a friend that you will meet her at Starbucks on Saturday at 10:00 for coffee - she certainly expects you to show at Starbucks at 10:00 on Saturday. When you tell God you are going to do something, He, too, expects you to show.

It is possible, though, that a person might make a vow to God in the heat of the moment - and hours or days later, forget or neglect the vow. It turns out that the vow was made somewhat flippantly.

Solomon has an interesting take on that potential scenario.

What if you do not intend to fulfill your vows to God?

[5:5] It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay.

Making a vow to God is such serious business that it would be better to remain silent and never make a vow, than to make one and not follow through.⁷

God doesn't ask that anyone make a vow. If you don't vow, it's not a problem. No harm, no foul. BUT, the making of a vow changes everything. Once a vow is made, you're responsible to keep it!

Banks in San Antonio don't have any claim on your money if you don't have a loan out with them. BUT, the scenario changes completely if you have borrowed money.

In the borrowing, you've promised to pay them back the money you've been lent - and you are under obligation to pay back. Banks don't take kindly to being not repaid. Solomon tells us that this is how God views our promises.

If you do not truly fulfill your vows to God!

[5:6] Do not let your speech cause you to sin and do not say in the presence of the messenger of God that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry on account of your voice and destroy the work of your hands?

God is angry with those who don't pay what they have vowed.

prophet offered wine to the family of the Rechabites. They refused because of a vow that one of their ancestors, Jonadab, made that neither he nor his descendants would drink wine. Jeremiah used the faithfulness of the Rechabites as an example to the Jews of what faithfulness to a vow to HIM should look like.

⁶ Acts 18:18.

⁷ Moses wrote something similar in the last book of the Law, Deuteronomy. When telling the Jews about Nazirite vows, he said, ***[Deuteronomy 23:21] When you make a vow to the Lord your God, you shall not delay to pay it, for it would be sin in you, and the Lord your God will surely require it of you. [22] However, if you refrain from vowing, it would not be sin in you.***

He is not angry because He selfishly didn't get what you promised you would give to Him. He is angry because not keeping your vow to Him treats Him disrespectfully. It is not worshipful.

Only a person who forgets the Main Thing - that **"God is in heaven"** - would back out of a promise made to Him.

Don't claim later on that you didn't mean it, because falling back on a lame excuse like that simply doesn't wash.⁸

Now, when we talk about making vows to God, what are we talking about? If you're not in the habit of doing what Solomon assumes that you'll do - making serious, thoughtful, reverent promises to God, here are some guidelines:

- **First**, make your vow temporary. In the Bible, we rarely find a person making a lifelong promise to God. The vow is usually for a finite period of time - and usually not for a very long period of time. Aim at some covering a few days, or a week, or a month.
- **Second**, make your vow concrete. Make a promise that deals with a specific behavior. You might consider a promise of a certain Bible reading schedule or prayer time. You could promise to make overtures to certain people who are in need. You might make a vow to give financially to advance God's Kingdom. The more specific, the more concrete, the better.
- **Third**, make a vow out of a sense of personal conviction. Don't promise God something because your friend did it. Don't make a vow to God because you read about it in a book. Don't do it because I've mentioned something specific this morning. No - make a promise to God after you have prayed about it and committed the matter to Him.

Be thoroughly convinced in your own mind that the promise you are making is going to honor Him. And once you are committed to doing it (really!) - make the vow.

(Of course, if you find yourself having broken a vow you have made to God - the route to travel is the route of the cross. Admit to God that you broke your word to Him. Don't sugar coat it. Don't describe it as something other than what it was - a moral failure. Run to the cross, claim your

⁸ In Acts, chapter 5, Ananias and Sapphira found out that promises made to God must be kept - and that severe consequences can result if that vow is violated.

forgiveness on the basis of Jesus' sacrifice for you and walk away confident that you are cleansed and forgiven! God's mercy is great, and forgiveness is available for us when we sin in any way, including that of breaking promises we make to God.)

Thus far, Solomon has told us to prepare our hearts properly for worship, to listen attentively as we worship, and to deal honestly and sacrificially with God in our worship.

In the final words of this section, he zeroes in on yet another HUGE element in keeping the main thing the main thing: the fear of God.

Fear God (v. 7)

[5:7] For in many dreams and in many words there is emptiness. Rather, fear God.⁹

Understanding the Fear of God

We could multiply verses from throughout the Bible, demonstrating the necessity for men and women to **"fear God."**

Statements flow throughout the Old Testament AND from the New about how important is the fear of God. Everyone from Moses to Isaiah and Jeremiah to David and from Peter and Paul and John wrote about it. Jesus spoke about it. The Bible makes it clear that we are to **"fear God."**

The **"fear of God"** should not be thought of as some archaic notion that went out of style with the end of the Middle Ages. The Bible's message, beginning to end is that right worship includes **"the fear of God."**

⁹ Here are the verses from Ecclesiastes that deal explicitly with the subject of the fear of God: [3:14] *I know that everything God does will remain forever; there is nothing to add to it and there is nothing to take from it, for God has so worked that men should fear Him. [8:12] Although a sinner does evil a hundred times and may lengthen his life, still I know that it will be well for those who fear God, who fear Him openly. [8:13] But it will not be well for the evil man and he will not lengthen his days like a shadow, because he does not fear God. [12:13] The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person.*

Books have been written and sermons preached on the fear of God - so I'm not even going to attempt a full treatment of the theme here. I only want to make a couple of comments that land the plane we've been flying today. We've been flying a course that will keep the main thing the main thing. And one of the mainest things is the fear of God.

It may not need to be said - but I'll say it, anyway: Fearing God doesn't mean that we cower in abject terror from our loving heavenly Father. The fear of God has more to do with reverence and awe at His majesty. The fear of God is respect - on steroids.

But, we'll keep on using the word *fear*. It is a perfectly good word and a thoroughly biblical word.

- We are to fear the thought of displeasing God.
- We are to fear what God He could do, were He not constrained by His own grace and love.
- As Jesus said, we are to ***“fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in Hell.”*** (Matthew 10:28)

But if the fear of God is important, it is not common. I want to suggest that the reason we don't fear God as we should is that we have chosen to cultivate other fears. And there are so many things to fear!

Choosing The Fear of God

The fears that bind us:

There is the fear of not fitting in to the crowd we want to belong to and its cousin, fear of rejection.

We may fear failure, or the possibility of “going without” materially. We can fear not being able to provide for our loved ones.

Fears of crippling disease and looming death may grip us, as may the fear of a national epidemic, \$15 dollar a gallon gasoline, the results of the next election, the year's last report card or the upcoming quarter's sales forecast.

These fears bind us. These are paralyzing fears, shackles that keep us from bold action and from joy.

By contrast, the fear of God is the fear that liberates.

The fear that liberates

Here's the deal.

We will all fear someone or something. It is our choice whether we will bow to the fears that enslave, or bow in reverent worship to the God who loves - and find liberation from every other fear.

[1 Tim. 1:17] Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever! Amen.