

# Some Warnings About Worship

## Surviving Evil . . . Under the Sun, Part 3

*Ecclesiastes 5:1-7*

### Discussion Guide

#### **Main Idea:**

Does God care how we worship Him? Is it really that important to worship with a correct heart? Is worship to be a self-centered or a God-centered exercise? Solomon delves into answering these questions in his journal, *Ecclesiastes chapter 5*. He lays out some guidelines and warnings for true personal worship of God in a corporate setting.

#### **Discussion Points:**

Worship will not take place when you treat God's presence with casual disregard or attempt to pull the wool over God's eyes.

- Why is it necessary to approach God with a right heart attitude?
- In Solomon's day, worship was held in the Temple where the indwelling of the Lord resided. How is it different today and do these differences change the requirement for a right heart?
- What is the condition of your heart when you worship God?

Worship will not take place when you talk to God and others like you have arrived and know all of the answers nor when you make promises you do not attempt to keep.

- Why is it possible that when we speak, it might not be wise? Why is it better to trust the words of the Lord? Why should worshippers never take on God's role?
- How would making a vow to the Lord and breaking it be detrimental in our worship of God?
- Do you play games with God? Why and how?

Worship will not take place when you demand your dreams instead of surrendering to God's desires.

- Why can following your dreams lead to vanity?
- How does demanding your will disrupt true and genuine worship?
- What does true and genuine worship look like? Does your worship reflect this?

## **Discussion Guide Cont.**

### **Gospel Connection:**

God desires his worshippers to seek Him and the gospel of Jesus Christ. Through the gift of salvation through His Son, believers are able to come into the presence of His glory and experience the grace of the Lord.

### **Practical Implications:**

**Think:** Worship is not gathering to remind God of everything we want; worship is being reminded together that *God* is everything we truly need. (Quoted directly from Stephen Davey's *Some Warnings about Worship* sermon.)

**Pray:** Thank Him that you are able to come directly into His presence to worship Him personally. Ask Him to guard your steps.

**Do:** Worship the Lord with a right heart in all that you do this week.

# Some Warnings About Worship

## Surviving Evil . . . Under the Sun, Part 3

*Ecclesiastes 5:1-7*

Is it possible to go to church and have nothing to do with God? Is it possible to enter a house dedicated to worship, and do virtually everything except worship God?

The answer might be more obvious than we want it to be. In fact, the clues to finding that answer can be found in the advertisements. One church announced that it did not judge or try to change anyone, so come one and all, evidently ignoring the fact that God is committed to changing us into the pure and righteous image of His Son, Jesus Christ. Another church boasted that they make no demands on anyone – so you can come and go just like you are and never need to feel any pressure, evidently ignoring the fact that the disciple of Christ has given his life to the claims of Christ as his living Lord.

I get a regular stream of cards in my mailbox from a truckload of churches promising great music, short sermons, and good coffee. That is certainly misguided and trivial, but not necessarily sinful. I like good coffee, and you like short sermons, so, we will give you good coffee. I'll wait.

Where in all of these advertisements is the invitation to come and worship God because He is a God of glory and He is also a consuming fire you don't want to mess around with? The evidence that we are all infected with a consumer, self-centered desire to make the worship service more about us than about the Lord is the way we talk about a good one. That was a good service – why? We get out our mental check list:

- Good parking – check
- Good climate control – check
- Good seating – check
- Good music – check
- Good sermon – check, check, and check

Reminds me of the woman who shook her pastor's hand on the way out of the auditorium after the service and she said to him, "That was a good sermon, pastor."

He responded, rather proudly, "Don't thank me, you'll have to thank the Lord."

She replied, "Well it wasn't *that* good."

Why are people attending church in this country today? Is it the sermon or the seating or the coffee or the music? And what will pull more people into the parking lot? That question betrays the real answer - what are we advertising?

We often say that our churches in America are going the way of Europe. And in the last 30 years alone, the Anglican population of England, Wales, and Scotland has plummeted; it has gone from 40% of the population to 12% in three decades. That's a staggering decline. And they are scrambling for answers while ignoring the obvious, such as the absence of the preaching of God's word.

I once sat in the Queen's chapel in Windsor Castle just outside of London on a Sunday morning with my wife and we heard the ramblings of a sermon that had nothing to do with scripture or the gospel. Never mind the lack of moral conviction and theological integrity, formalism has replaced worship. One of the former archbishops of the Anglican Church said recently that the Anglican Church is one generation away from extinction, and so they are scrambling, much like the church in America to attract a crowd, but it isn't a scramble back to the Bible or back to the gospel.

Just this last year, I clipped a few articles online that featured several Anglican church leaders who decided that their cathedrals, as one church leader said, needed to celebrate the whole of humanity. Let's celebrate each other and have a good time together – that'll draw

people in. One cathedral set up a putt-putt golf course in their sanctuary to draw visitors.



The dean of this Cathedral insisted to the BBC reporters that their initiative “was not a cheap marketing trick, but a serious pastoral concern”.



The theme of the golf course was bridge building. One church leader said their plan was to educate visitors [on] spiritual bridge-building. So it’s a spiritual exercise.

Let me tell you, when I play putt-putt, there isn’t anything spiritual about it. I just want to get a better score than my wife – but I never do. She beats me every time. There’s nothing spiritual about it!

I came across another article where a Cathedral did something last year that was much more exciting than putt-putt.



They installed a three-story-high slide in the middle of the sanctuary which they borrowed from a nearby carnival. The idea came from one of the cathedral’s ordained pastors who said he wanted to work out a way to get visitors closer to the building’s domed ceiling so they could admire the stained glass windows.

That part of the plan evidently worked.



One church leader said in an interview, “We’re always looking at how we can broaden our appeal, how we can bring in people who might think, ‘Cathedrals aren’t for me – they’re stuffy and exclusive.’”

So you can come here and meet with God or take a slide.



In fact, the first person to go down the slide to christen it, the reporter said, was The Very Reverend dean of this cathedral. The article read that she slid down the slide several times amidst the flashing bright lights all while wearing her traditional vestments as the organist played an accompaniment. She told the reporter afterward how excited she was about all the people who would come to church that day to ride down the slide.<sup>1</sup>

Where is that sense of sacred-stirring, life-altering, scripture-expounding, music-inspiring, spirit-convicting, sin-confessing, God-glorifying worship as an assembly?

Beloved, we reveal our motives and attitudes toward worship by how and why *we* arrive here today, what *we* want God to do in us while we are here, how we want God to use us while we are here and what we are going to say and do when we leave here and re-enter the mission field of our world.

What does God say about true and genuine worship? Without any advance warning, which is typical in wisdom literature, Solomon changes his focus from the world of business to the world of worship, and he makes some inspired observations in his personal journal. We are in *Ecclesiastes chapter 5* now, and as we work our way through this paragraph, Solomon presents nothing less than five warnings that tell us what to do and what not to do which ultimately defines for us true worship.

**Warning #1: Worship will not take place when you treat God's presence with casual disregard.**

Notice as Solomon begins *chapter 5*:

***Guard your steps when you go to the house of God*** (Ecclesiastes 5:1a).

For Solomon's original readers, *the house of God* would have been a reference to the Temple in Jerusalem. It is interesting when you think about the fact that Solomon had observed the digression of genuine worship over the decades, right there in Jerusalem, in spite of that glorious Temple David had designed and Solomon had built and then covered with gold. But Solomon himself had played a role in this digression by compromising his own moral standards and disobeying God's word. Along with his multiple wives, he accommodated their false gods and false religions.

But now he returns in his old age to the truth and he pounds the pulpit, so to speak, to remind his son Rehoboam and his nation what true worship means. You can easily broaden his directive to anyone approaching God today, whether individually or as a body. There's a timeless principle here for the church today.

Solomon effectively says, "Look, if you want to worship the true and living God, you'd better approach Him with the right heart attitude."

***Guard your steps*** - in other words, enter His presence thoughtfully, appropriately, respectfully.<sup>ii</sup> Don't be dull-minded and insensitive. We are approaching boldly the throne, the very presence of God (*Hebrews 4:16*), through Jesus Christ our Mediator and Redeemer (*1 Timothy 2:5*).

Check your attitude at the door! Now this doesn't mean you have to enter the assembly with hushed voices and somber faces. Some would be quick to quote Habakkuk 2:20, "*The Lord is in His holy temple; let all the earth be silent before Him.*" And others would be quick to quote the Psalmist David, *Shout for joy to the Lord . . . burst into jubilant song with music . . .*

*praise Him in the congregation of the people* (Psalm 98:4; 107:32).

When Solomon says to guard your steps, he is essentially saying the same thing my parents told me when I was getting close to that territory known as disrespectful, "You better watch your step young man." I heard that at least three times growing up – a week. Watch your step young man - and I knew that didn't mean I was supposed to look down at my feet; it meant I was supposed to check my attitude.<sup>iii</sup>

One author summarized well how we are to approach God – worship is when we approach God with an attitude of reverence, gratitude, expectation and resignation to His will.<sup>iv</sup> Worship will not take place when you enter God's presence with casual disregard.

**Warning #2: Worship will not take place when you attempt to use words to pull the wool over God's eyes.**

Notice the last part of *verse 1*:

***To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they are doing evil*** (Ecclesiastes 5:1b).

Remember *a fool*, in the Bible, isn't somebody who is slow at math and science; he is someone who is disobedient. He is so committed to his defiance, Solomon writes here, that he doesn't even realize how evil his hypocrisy is before God. Solomon describes a fool here who comes into the presence of God, but he is not ready to listen to God, he is ready to lecture God.<sup>v</sup> A true worshipper comes into the house of worship ready to listen.<sup>vi</sup>

In Solomon's day, the priests would have explained the meaning of the sacrifices, the festivals, the observances, and the responsibilities of the worshipper, and the scriptures would be read and explained. There was much to see *and* hear. In fact, the Hebrew verb here for *listen* carries the idea of paying careful attention in order to obey.<sup>vii</sup>

The foolish person goes through the motions of worship without any intention to obey what he hears. But they can sing with everybody else; they can close their eyes and sing, We Exalt Thee, O Lord. But what they sing isn't what they mean.

I love the little girl who illustrated what God might be hearing us actually sing. She was standing next to her mother in a church service as everyone was singing, "We exalt thee; we exalt thee, O Lord." Her mother looked down at her four-year-old daughter who was just belting out the lyrics, getting the lyrics mixed up as she sang at the top of her voice, "We exhaust thee; we exhaust thee, O Lord."

One author commenting on this passage said that God is not listening to us pray and sing through spiritual headphones, he is listening to us with a spiritual stethoscope.<sup>viii</sup>

When sheep were herded into the pen at night, the shepherds would take their rods and part the wool looking for ticks, cuts, bruises, or skin diseases; the wool would often mask the true condition of the sheep. From that we get our expression, pulling the wool over someone's eyes, masking the true condition. Nobody is pulling the wool over the Lord, our Good Shepherd's eyes.

Our hearts are open books and worshippers are ready to listen to the word, confess sin, and thank Him for His grace. We do not lecture Him, we stand in awe of Him.

**Warning #3: Worship will not take place when you talk to God and others like you've arrived.**

Notice *verse 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. For a dream comes with much business, and a fool's voice with many words***  
(Ecclesiastes 5:2-3).

Let me deal with this last phrase first since it probably confused you as it did me. After looking at the Hebrew text, it seems clear to me the word for *business* is to be understood as stress or trouble or anxiety. In fact, in *chapter 2* the same word is translated in the context of *sorrow* or *pain*. In *chapter 2:23*, you have a companion text to *chapter 5*. Solomon writes, ***for all his days are full of sorrow and his work is a vexation, even at night his heart does not rest.***

In other words, because of his vexing, stressful, anxious life, he is fitful; he is restless, and his dreams are convoluted combinations of events and anxieties of the day.

Have you ever dreamed like that? It's a combination of current events or people combined with memories or situation and the dreams really border on nightmares.<sup>ix</sup>

They are not some sort of mystical word from God – be careful with that; they are not some sort of sign. It is simply your troubled, anxious, unconscious mind creating strange dreams or nightmares that trouble you and end up robbing you of sound sleep. Solomon evidently had that same experience, and he is drawing an analogy here. Just as stress and anxiety and sorrow can create these unneeded, unhelpful dreams, they are just like a fool who creates unneeded, unhelpful words.

Now go back to Solomon's warning – so – ***don't be rash with your words . . . don't let your heart be hasty.*** Life is hard enough, don't make it worse by running your mouth. Solomon is describing someone who thinks they know all the answers. And he adds this sarcastic phrase to serve as the punchline – ***for God is in heaven and you are on earth.*** In other words, you haven't arrived. You are not in heaven yet, and even then, you will never be God. And since God is always wise whenever He speaks and we're not God, there is the possibility that when we speak, it might not be wise.

My parents made me memorize as a kid that quote from Abraham Lincoln – "Better to remain silent and be thought a fool, than to

speak up and remove all doubt'. My three brothers needed that quote more than I did.

Solomon's point is make your words few; don't be too quick to give advice. Only God who sees, as it were from Heaven, life from beginning to end can unlock the riddles of the world, and He is worth trusting when we can't figure it out. Worshippers never take on God's role; in fact, the best we can ever do for others is to offer counsel and advice and comfort from what God has already said Himself.

**Warning #4: Worship will not take place when you make promises you don't attempt to keep.**

*Verse 4:*

*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 (Ecclesiastes 5:4-5).*

This needs little commentary. Vows were not commanded, although they were a familiar Old Testament practice. Vows appear in *Numbers 21* as part of a prayer, in *Jonah 2* as an expression of gratitude, in *Leviticus 22* as an offering to God, and in *1 Samuel* as a dedication of a child.<sup>x</sup> Since they are not commanded, Solomon is saying that it is best not to make them if you plan to ignore them, delay them, or even deny you meant them.<sup>xi</sup>

Notice the next phrase in *verse 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? (Ecclesiastes 5:6).*

The *messenger* here is more than likely the temple associate who arrives to collect on your promise. You promised to give God something, and the guy from the temple shows up and, notice, you say that *it was a mistake*. Hey, you

misunderstood. I didn't mean it that literally. I didn't actually say that.

Now, when you and I make a promise or commitment to the Lord, we are not able to fulfill them consistently or perfectly, but God knows that it is your heart's desire to keep your promises and commitments to Him. Just be careful when you make them. Don't play games with God. The truth is, we make more promises more easily and quickly than we often realize.

Did you know that during our congregational singing this morning, you and I sang at least 20 promises to God? I counted them.

We promised the Lord as we sang that we would:

- tell others the gospel
- forsake the follies of sin
- await His coming with faithful anticipation
- we would love Him in life and we would love Him up to the moment of our death

We promised all those together.

And for every believer, we really have every desire, longing, plan, intention, prayer, and commitment to fulfill those promises, and, when we fail, we run in repentance and grief to the cross of our Lord in confession so that fellowship with Him is restored.

But an imitation worshipper will make these promises and then sin with delight before the sun sets on this Lord's Day and think nothing of it.

Yea, I sang that, but I didn't mean it that literally. Don't be so serious. Forsake the follies of sin? Right. God understands! Don't be such a stuffed shirt; have a little fun. We can go back to church next Sunday and pay our respects.

Solomon says here that God is actually *angry* with that kind of person. Did you notice? It is the Hebrew word for *wrath and fury*. This is a word ultimately reserved for the unbeliever's future condemnation, for those who never intended to begin with to keep his word or follow the word of God. God will have lasting judgement and eternal destruction, hinted at here by Solomon in *verse 6*, for the hypocrite

who had no real interest in God but loved playing the public game of religion. They came for coffee and business connections and maybe even a round of putt-putt.

**Final warning: Worship will not take place when you demand your dreams instead of surrendering to God's desires.**

Notice *verse 7*:

*For when dreams increase and words grow many, there is vanity* (that is: emptiness/futility/wasted lives) *but God is the one you must fear* (Ecclesiastes 5:7).

You start following your dreams, your daydreams, your will and your wishes. Solomon effectively says here, you are going to waste your life chasing after vanity, chasing after the wind. Worship isn't demanding your dreams be accomplished in Heaven. True worship is pleading and desiring and longing for God's will to be done on earth.

So here's the solution - as Solomon puts the bookend phrase here to this section of watching your step when you go to worship God, he writes that God is the one you must fear. You

come into the assembly, as it were today, to this house dedicated to the worship of God. This isn't the temple; your body is now the temple of God (*1 Corinthians 3:16*). This isn't the house of God; we together make up the house of God (*1 Peter 2:5*). But this *is* a house dedicated to the worship of God, and we have come together, just as the church has gathered for 2,000 years now, to collectively honor the Lord Jesus Christ, and . . .

- worship Him and
- exalt Him and
- praise Him and
- learn about Him and
- confess to Him and
- surrender to Him – and yes,
- make promises to Him

But it is so much deeper and richer than a three-story slide or a cup of coffee. We are not asking people to get interested in things, we are wanting people to become interested in Him, enjoying with us the gospel and the glory and the grace of God.

Worship is not gathering to remind God of everything we want; worship is being reminded together that *God* is everything we truly need.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 1/26/2020 by Stephen Davey.

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i Adapted from: The New York Times, "*God Save the Cathedral?*" (August, 13, 2019)

ii Ray C. Steadman, *Is This All There Is To Life?* (Discovery House, 1999), p. 62

iii Adapted from David Jeremiah, *Searching for Heaven on Earth* (Integrity, 2004), p. 108

iv Ibid

v Adapted from Walter Kaiser, Jr. *Coping With Change: Ecclesiastes* (Christian Focus, 2013), p. 115

vi William D. Barrick, *Ecclesiastes* (Christian Focus, 2011), p. 88

vii R. Laird Harris, Gleason Archer, Bruce Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament: Vol. II* (Moody Press, 1980), p. 938

viii Adapted from David Gibson, *Living Life Backward* (Crossway, 2017), p. 85

ix Adapted from Jim Winter, *Opening Up Ecclesiastes* (Day One, 2005), p. 72

x Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes* (IVP Academic, 2009), p. 114

