

Book:	<i>Ecclesiastes</i>
Series:	<i>Two Ways to Live: Under the Sun or In the Fear of God</i>
Lesson 9:	<i>Wisdom for Worship</i>
Text:	<i>Ecclesiastes 5:1-7</i>
Date:	<i>Sunday, March 17, 2013</i>

*Colonial Hills
Baptist Church*

Key



= Teacher Information



= Discussion Starter

Book:	<i>Ecclesiastes</i>
Series:	<i>Two Ways to Live: Under the Sun or In the Fear of God</i>
Lesson 9:	<i>Wisdom for Worship</i>
Text:	<i>Ecclesiastes 5:1-7</i>
Date:	<i>Sunday, March 17, 2013</i>
Next Lesson:	<i>Ecclesiastes 7:1-14</i>



TEACHING TIP

This lesson begins the second half of Ecclesiastes in which we begin to consider living life “in the fear of God.” While he will still allude to the darkness of life “under the sun,” Solomon begins to lay a foundation for his great concluding summary in 12:13-14.

This topic is a convicting study. You will want to take some time praying for God’s conviction and transformation in your own thoughts and habits so that you are a wise worshipper yourself when you begin to instruct others on Sunday.

We’ll take 2 weeks on this lesson.

Psalm 104:1 — “Bless the Lord, O my soul. O Lord my God, Thou art very great; Thou art clothed with honour and majesty.”

INTRODUCTION

Illustration: In May of 2011, an awkward moment played out within Buckingham Palace. President Obama was on a routine trip to Europe, when he attended a special function within that royal building. During the dinner, he proposed a toast to honor Queen Elizabeth II. He invited the dinner guests to stand with him, and grabbing his glass, he said, “To her majesty the Queen.” He paused a moment before continuing his brief toast, but the orchestra took that pause as their cue to begin playing “God Save the Queen.” While the orchestra played, the President continued to speak and the Queen continued to look straight ahead. Ending his toast, the President said, “To the Queen,” and lifted his glass to her. The Queen smiled a bit uncomfortably, but did not accept the toast. Instead, she remained unmoved, looking ahead, allowing the music to play. The President awkwardly put his glass

down, and everyone waited in silence for the song to be over, when they finally enjoyed the toast together. The reverence of the moment was mishandled, and the President looked quite embarrassed.¹ It was the traditional reverence of that moment that highlighted the President's blunder, but the only consequence that he experienced was a momentary humiliation and embarrassment.

In Ecclesiastes 5:1-7, we enter into the presence of Royalty, and such an entrance demands our reverence. However, not all who come into the presence of this King do so respectfully—the passage refers three times of “fools”—and these individuals discover that the consequence of their irreverence is much more severe than mere embarrassment and awkwardness (v. 1c, 6).

This passage begins with the phrase “keep [lit. guard] thy foot when thou goest to the house of God” and ends with “fear thou God.” Here, then, is instruction relating to the alternative of living merely “under the sun.” While that one way to live has been explored in detail in the first six chapters of Ecclesiastes, here Solomon begins to provide instruction on living life “in the fear of God.”

More specifically, he's addressing the manner in which we enter into the presence of our God and King. Solomon is calling us to watchfulness in our worship. He's contrasting fear-filled worshippers with foolish worshippers, reverent worship with rash worship. And in order to save us from the severe consequences of irreverence, Solomon provides us with simple wisdom for our worship. **We must approach God reverently.** Summarizing this passage, Kidner says:

[Solomon's] target 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. Such a man has forgotten where and who he is; above all, who God is....If we are tempted to write this off as a piece of Old Testament harshness, the New Testament will disconcert us equally with its warnings against making pious words meaningless, or


treating lightly what is holy (Mt. 7:21ff; 23:16ff; 1 Cor. 11:27ff). No amount of emphasis on grace can justify taking liberties with God, for the very concept of grace demands gratitude; and gratitude cannot be casual.²


Yes, **we must approach God reverently.** Throughout this passage, we're going to learn from Solomon six different characteristics of such fear-filled, reverent worship.

SERIOUSNESS (v. 1a)

“Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God.”

Solomon's immediate admonition can be literally translated and contemporarily understood as “Watch your step!” Care must be taken, preparations must be made, readiness must be demonstrated, and seriousness must prevail for the one who enters the “house of God.” The context makes it clear that this refers to God's temple, the place of His presence (cf. Genesis 28:17). Entrance into God's presence has always had certain demands attached to it (Exodus 3:5; Leviticus 15:31),³ and while for New Testament believers those demands have been accomplished in Christ (Matthew 27:51; Hebrews 10:19-21), it is still incumbent upon us to approach carefully and seriously (Hebrews 10:22-23; 12:14, 18-24, 25, 28-29; 1 Corinthians 11:27-32).⁴ God is never to be taken lightly, and while we glory in His relationship to us as a Father and Friend, we remember that He is in heaven (v. 2; Matthew 6:9).

 **Application:** How does a simple meditation upon God as “God” provoke seriousness when we approach Him (Psalm 8:3-4, 9)? *open discussion*

 What does the language of 1 Corinthians 3:16 and 6:19-20 suggest to us about the extent of such seriousness in our lives as New Testament believers (cf. Psalm 33:13-15; Hebrews 4:13)? *While the parallel may be drawn between “going up to the temple of God” and our corporate worship services on Sunday,*

such seriousness should characterize our entire life lived before God whom we now worship, not in a temple, but in “spirit and in truth” (John 4:23-24). Therefore, at the dinner table, in front of the TV, in privacy, at work, in the classroom, in the movie theatre, in our personal devotions, etc. we do not consider God and our relationship to Him lightly, but do all things to magnify His glory (1 Corinthians 10:31). This is what the New Testament calls “sober mindedness,” and it is the natural product of those who recognize that they live all their life “in the sight of God.”

Transition: Fear-filled, reverent worshippers of God are characterized first by seriousness, and secondly by attentiveness.

ATTENTIVENESS (v. 1b)

“Be more ready to hear than to give the sacrifice of fools, for they consider not that they do evil.”

In the moment of worship, Solomon says that listening is better than offering. Sometimes, all the peripherals in our worship services—all of the things that we do in the worship service (i.e., offering in song, giving, prayer, testimonies, special music, etc.)—can distract us from that which is most important. One commentator explains:

Sometimes extreme concern over one issue is an unconscious screen against facing other issues. It is as though we call God’s attention to the sacrifice we are making while being blind to some essential command that he makes. Thus we often find it easier to make sacrificial efforts to demonstrate against some evil in far distant lands than to face evil here at home and in our own lives.⁵

Therefore, lest we miss what we need from God, we must come to listen. See, our greatest need is for God; thus, our greatest response is simply to listen. And we are invited to listen, yes, even to “draw near to listen,” for that is the literal meaning of “be more ready” (Exodus 3:5; 2 Samuel 20:16; Jonah 1:6). The word

“listen” has the double-edged meaning of both hearing and heeding (Exodus 24:7; Matthew 7:24-27), and so we are encouraged to listen with active ears. This is an identifiable mark of reverent worship—expectant (“drawn near”) attentiveness (“to listen”) to the Word of God.

Sometimes an invitation is extended after a sermon this way, “If God has spoken to you through the message this morning, will you respond?” Scripture would argue a bit with such an invitation, for every time God’s Word is faithfully expounded, God did speak to His people with purpose (Isaiah 55:10-11; 2 Timothy 3:16-4:5). But were they listening?

It is a mark of “foolish” worship (i.e., “sacrifice of fools”), not fear-filled worship, to merely offer a sacrifice in haste, duty, and ritual without pausing and even coming close to hear from God. Today, those who mindlessly sing the songs, critiquingly listen to the special, dutifully contribute to the offering, and impatiently doodle during the sermon are offering the “sacrifice of fools” and committing a grave “evil.” In a sovereign irony, they will reap exactly what they’ve sown: they’ve ignored God and will be ignored by God (cf. 1 Samuel 15:22-23, 26).





What motivations often compel people to go to church on Sundays? What is wrong with those motivations? See paragraph below.


Too frequently, we come to worship inappropriately motivated: we love the friendship and fellowship, and so we come; we like being greeters, ushers, and Sunday School workers, and so we come; we feel the burden of teaching or administrating, and so we come; we need to maintain an image, and so we come. And along the way we have forgotten that we come, not because we bring anything to offer, but because God has all that we need (Matthew 7:21-27). So, we are guilty of being Marthas, “cumbered about much serving” at church, but neglecting the “one needful thing,” “that good part which shall not be taken away from us”—simply drawing near to listen to and learn from the words of Jesus (Luke 10:38-42).

We would be wise, then, to weekly evaluate the motive and mindset of our worship: “Why have I come? How am I oriented now that I’m here? What should be my goals during this time? What am I hearing from God that I now need to heed?” Fear-filled worship is marked by attentiveness to God.

Those who ignore this important element of fear-filled worship—attentiveness to the Word of God—will reap exactly what they’ve sown: they have chosen to not listen to God, and thus God will not be heard by them. In other words, they’ve chosen to remove God from their worship, and that itself is the consequence.

 **Application:** What does that situation look like as it’s played out today? *A believer who attends but isn’t really attentive to a Bible study through the Armor of God in Sunday School continues to find himself unable to “stand” in spiritual warfare—since He didn’t “listen” to God, He now isn’t “helped” by God because the help was in the Word; a believer who is not actively attentive (and thoughtful, as we’ll see in our next point) during Sunday sermons may find little relief in the valleys of life, because he/she doesn’t grasp the encouragement from God’s Word offered each Sunday; etc.*

 How can you “draw near” to listen to God on Sundays? *open discussion (probably starts Saturday night or Sunday morning at home, though)*

 If listening is more important than offering, then how does your evaluation of a Sunday worship service need to change? *“Sadly, too much emphasis is placed on the way the message is produced and delivered. How many conversations take place at the Sunday lunch table that pass judgment on the service? The hymns, prayers and especially the preaching become a topic of criticism based on whether or not they pleased the hearer. Such conversations should have taken place at the breakfast table where judgment should have begun [concerning] the readiness of the congregation to go to the place of worship and ‘Walk prudently ... and draw near to hear’! When we come to worship we should be prepared!”⁶*

Transition: Closely connected to the first two characteristics is a third—thoughtfulness. Indeed, this serves as a foundation for the first two, for a thoughtful worshipper will be both serious and attentive.

THOUGHTFULNESS (v. 2a, d, 3)

*“Be not rash with thy mouth...Therefore let thy words be few.
For a dream cometh through the multitude of business,
and a fool’s voice is known by multitude of words.”*

Colloquially put, Solomon encourages worshippers to “think before you speak.” This is not a warning against using words as we worship, but against a hasty thoughtlessness that may underlie those words. The fewer the words, the more time for reverent thought, and visa versa (i.e., the more the words, the less time for reverent thought). Solomon sees a link between wordiness (or wordlessness) and thoughtlessness (or thoughtfulness), even as there is a link between the stress of life (“business”—1:13; 2:23, 26; 3:10; 4:8) and a restless, dream-filled night. Since foolish worship (i.e., “a fool’s voice”) is the product of mindless chatter (i.e., “multitude of words”) Solomon advocates thoughtfulness in order that we may be reverent.

Illustration: “The U.S. President, Calvin Coolidge, was noted for his reluctance in using more words than absolutely necessary. At a dinner party he was seated next to a well-known actress who informed him that she had bet someone that she could make him say at least three words during the evening. ‘You lose,’ replied Coolidge and remained silent for the rest of the meal.”⁷

Solomon would have admired both the thoughtfulness and carefulness of Coolidge’s speech, and he recommends the same for our worship. John Bunyan wrote, “In prayer, it is better to have a heart without words, than words without a heart” (cf. Romans 8:26-27).



What might tempt or provoke us to be “rash why our mouths” when we approach God? *anguish (Job 40:3-5) or resentment about something in life (Psalm 73:15); pride and showiness in our level of knowledge or spirituality (Matthew 6:7-8; Luke 18:9-14); we may just not have thought about it ☺ — it’s easier to talk than to think*

Those who know God deeply, love Him fervently, and obey Him habitually are believers who have cultivated their minds and quieted their mouths in their pursuit of God. Or, in the words of James, they are “swift to hear, slow to speak, [and] slow to wrath” as they “receive...the engrafted Word” (James 1:19, 21).

In his book, *Think*, John Piper writes, “As few things are as easy as thinking, few things are as difficult as thinking well” (paraphrase). The Internet has exposed the dearth of thoughtfulness among those who profess to worship God (e.g., on blogs, etc.). Unfortunately, while there is no lack of words in these innumerable blog posts, there is a noticeable absence of good thought behind them (cf. Psalm 50:21). Interestingly, although we would carefully prepare our words if asked to speak at the White House or Buckingham Palace, we fail to exhibit the same carefulness when approaching God.

A. W. Tozer, who was known in his day as he is now for his rich relationship with God, began his book, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, with a chapter entitled, “Why We Must Think Rightly About God.” In that chapter, he makes the following statements.

- “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us...Worship is pure or base as the worshiper entertains high or low thoughts of God.”
- “We tend by a secret law of the soul to move toward our mental image of God...Were we able to extract from any man a complete answer to the question, ‘What comes into your mind when you think about God?’ we might predict with certainty the spiritual future of that man.”

- “That our idea of God correspond as nearly as possible to the true being of God is of immense importance to us....The essence of idolatry is the entertainment of thoughts about God that are unworthy of Him.”
- “A right conception of God is basic not only to systematic theology but to practical Christian living as well....Low views of God destroy the gospel for all who hold them.”
- “The first step down for any church is taken when it surrenders its high opinion of God....The heaviest obligation lying upon the Christian Church today is to purify and elevate her concept of God until it is once more worthy of Him—and of her.”
- “We do the greatest service to the next generation of Christians by passing on to them undimmed and undiminished that noble concept of God which we received.”

The fear-filled worshipper of God exercises his mind more than his mouth in His relationship with God.



Application: What are the spiritual blessings of approaching God carefully and thoughtfully (cf. Isaiah 26:3; 2 Corinthians 10:5; Ephesians 6:10-17; Philippians 4:8-9)? *open discussion*



From Tozer’s meditations above, what did he see as the consequences of thoughtlessness and the benefits of thoughtfulness in our worship of God? *See above quotes.*



How can we cultivate thoughtfulness in our worship? *open discussion—meditation is going to be a key application here; perhaps there needs to be some mutual accountability in that area*

Transition: Also discovered in verse 2 is a fourth characteristic of fear-filled, reverent worship.

MEEKNESS (v. 2b-c)

*“Let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God,
for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth.”*

Solomon rebukes the same spirit that he talks about in 6:10-12, only now it’s in a professing worshipper. One author writes, “For the Teacher the supreme act of impiety is the presumption that one can be in a position of control when dealing with God...we have nothing to offer God and thus are in no position to bargain with or impress him.”⁸ While there is no prohibition again 1 Peter 5:7 here, there is the warning against using (or misusing) God and making Him somehow serve us.

In essence, this point simply continues a thread found in the all the others—worship is about God, not us. This admonition simply strikes at the heart of our worship and commands us to keep God, not ourselves there. Fear-filled worshippers enter His presence with an appropriate attitude of meekness, putting themselves under Him and never presuming upon Him.



How might this spirit manifest itself in our worship today?
open discussion

In the second half of this verse, Solomon explains why meekness is the only appropriate response—“God is in heaven, and thou upon earth.” If we are not biblically aware of who God is and who we are, we will fail to worship Him as He desires and deserves.

Illustration: When you are driving down a road and a car flashes its lights when it passes you, you probably slow down. Why? Because sometimes that car is giving a helpful (but not so subtle or submissive) heads-up that a cop is around the corner. If you’re driving on a highway when a police car merges into traffic, your immediate reaction is probably to slow down even if it means going slower than the speed limit, because no one wants to pass a cop.

In this text, Solomon flashes his lights at us, and reminds us that God is, not around the corner, but “in heaven.” R. C. Sproul writes, “Men are never duly touched and impressed with a

conviction of their insignificance, until they have contrasted themselves with the majesty of God.”⁹ Solomon agrees, and thus he seeks to bring reality to bear on our trivial, careless, thoughtless worship and instill a healthy dosage of raw fear (Exodus 20:18-21; 2 Corinthians 5:11) for this one, true God. The Teacher has already depicted God as Ruler (3:1-15) and Judge (3:16-22). Now, he writes that His realm and court is “in heaven.” The point is that God is altogether unlike us—He is distinct, unique, separate, holy.

Know therefore this day and consider it in thine heart, that the Lord, He is God in heaven above and upon the earth beneath; there is none else. (Deuteronomy 4:39)

Is not God in the height of heaven? And behold the height of the stars, how high they are! (Job 22:12)

But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, the heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain Thee; how much less this house that I have builded? (1 Kings 8:27)


For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy, “I dwell in the high and holy place.” (Isaiah 57:15)

And all the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing, and He doeth according to His will in the army of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth, and none can stay His hand or say unto Him, “What doest thou?” (Daniel 4:35)

In light of these texts, the fact that we are even considering at all the possibility of coming before Him brings to mind at least three other truths that we must be aware of and respond in meekness to, as fear-filled, reverent worshippers:

- The kindness of God in making a way (Exodus 20:2; Galatians 4:4-7; Titus 3:4-7; 1 Peter 3:18)
- The cost of our admission (Hebrews 10:19-21)
- The purity that is demanded (1 Peter 1:16)

Fear-filled worshippers are compelled to come seriously, attentively, thoughtfully, and meekly, because they are ever aware of the awesome character of God and amazing works of God. Their worship truly becomes all about Him, because they recognize that it really is all about Him—their restoration to God is all of grace and all of God, and they cannot help but worship lavishly (Luke 7:36-47; 1 Peter 2:9).

 **Application:** How do we cultivate an ever-present awareness of who God is and who we are, and the issues that flow from those truths? *open discussion*

Transition: We must approach God reverently, not only in the spirit of seriousness, attentiveness, thoughtfulness, and meekness, but also with a sense of responsiveness.

RESPONSIVENESS (vv. 4-5)

*“When thou vowest a vow unto God,
defer not to pay it; for he hath no pleasure in fools.
Pay that which thou hast vowed.
Better is it that thou shouldest not vow,
than that thou shouldest vow and not pay.”*

Stated both negatively (“defer not to pay it”) and positively (“pay”), Solomon exhorts wise worshippers to respond to God in their worship. Literally he says, “When you vow a vow,” repeating the root in both its verb and noun form.

The verb נָדַר (nadar, “to vow”) refers to the action of making a solemn promise to the Lord to perform an action or offer a sacrifice, e.g., Lev 27:8; Num 6:21; 30:11; Deut 23:23-24; Jonah 2:10; Mal 1:14; Pss 76:12; 132:2...The noun נֶדָר (“vow”) was a gift or offering promised to be given to the Lord (Num 30:3; Deut 12:11; 23:19; Isa 19:12; Nah 2:1...Ps 61:6, 9).¹⁰

In Jewish worship, there were basically two kinds of worship—regulated worship and responsive worship. Regulated worship

was outlined in the Mosaic Law, was required of each Israelite, and was indispensable to enjoying a relationship with God. Responsive worship was an unregulated and natural addition to the Mosaic Law, arising from one’s own genuine encounter with God. While it was never mandated (cf. Deuteronomy 23:22),¹¹ it was more or less an assumed and regular part of an individual’s worship. Thus, regulated worship was the foundation for rightly relating to God; responsive worship was one’s personal reaction to being rightly related to God.

Whereas verse 1 may refer to the regulated worship of the Mosaic Law (i.e., “sacrifice”), verses 4-5 speak of responsive worship, particularly the response of “vowing a vow” to God. This was a practice in which a person would make some commitment or promise to God in response to what he had learned about God or what God had done for him. Examples of these vows include Genesis 28:20-22; Numbers 21:2; 30:3; Psalm 132:2-5; and 1 Samuel 1:11.

In this passage, Solomon is particularly concerned that worshippers fulfill their vows, for while these vows weren’t required, their payment was (i.e., “defer not to pay it...pay that...better [to] not vow than [to] vow and not pay”—Deuteronomy 23:21, 23; Psalm 15:4; 76:11-12; Proverbs 20:25; Nahum 1:15; Malachi 1:14; Matthew 21:28-31). Paying these vows is frequently addressed throughout the Old Testament (cf. Judges 11:29-40; 2 Samuel 15:7; Psalm 22:25; 50: 14; 66:13-14; 116:14, 18; Isaiah 19:21; Jonah 2:9). In our verse, the motivation for fulfilling these vows is two-fold: (1) only fools fail to do this, (2) God’s wrathful displeasure befalls such fools (cf. v. 6).

Within the New Covenant context, regulated worship has been completely fulfilled in Jesus (cf. the message of Hebrews). No longer must we fulfill certain regulations in order to enjoy a “shadowy” fellowship with God. Jesus “finished” (John 19:30) those requirements, providing complete forgiveness for sin and allowing us bold and unhindered access to God (Ephesians 2:13-18; Hebrews 10:19-22). Thus, we now spend our lifetime,

individually and corporately, engaged in responsive worship. We worship now “in spirit and in truth” (John 4:23-24) responding “reasonably” to the realities of the gospel (Romans 12:1—the last phrase can be translated “reasonable service” [KJV] or “spiritual worship” [ESV]). God’s love toward us through Jesus and our reciprocal love toward Him overflow into active and constant response. In other words, appropriately knowing God will provoke the appropriate worship of God, which is evidenced in appropriate response to God.¹² You cannot see God or hear from God (vv. 1-2) and not be moved to respond in worshipful obedience!

One author transparently expresses, “I sometimes struggle with how to properly respond to God’s magnitude in a world bent on ignoring or merely tolerating Him. But know this: God will not be tolerated. He instructs us to worship and fear Him.”¹³ Indeed, while the worship of God is commanded, never what there a duty more delightful or natural to fulfill. Thus, with this author, we should wrestle to consider what an appropriate response should be. And, when we are provoked to make some commitment, some decision, some promise in our relationship with Christ, we are cautioned by this passage to be sure to fulfill that.


God’s promises to his people are rehearsed time and time again as we meet with him in worship. It is fitting that we are not casual in the promises we might make to him. How sincere are we when we sing, “O Jesus, I have promised to serve thee to the end?” [sic] for, as Matthew Henry points out, “A vow is a bond upon the soul.”¹⁴


Such carefulness in our response complements the seriousness of worship with which we were challenged in verses 1-2. When we approach God and the worship of Him seriously, we will both desire to respond appropriately and be sure to fulfill that response. We will be delivered from the self-deception of “hearing” only (James 1:22) and will respond in committed, active, and actual obedience.


Contrariwise, if we respond by “making a decision,” but fail to carry it out, it probably means that our mindset was not serious and God-centered, but rather self-centered. A self-centered mindset is motivated, not by a desire to humbly “hear” and obey God (vv. 1-2), but by an attempt to alleviate guilt, to live up to personal expectations, to conform to religious customs, to deal with the emotional burden of the moment, to get out of a difficult situation, etc. Rather than honestly and reasonably responding to God because of who He is and what He has done, the foolish worshiper “makes decisions” to help himself feel better—and when he feels better, the decision drops by the wayside.¹⁵


Notice Wiersbe’s perceptive and pastoral words on this matter:


People make empty vows because they live in a religious “dream world”; they think that words are the same as deeds (v. 7). Their worship is not serious, so their words are not dependable. They enjoy the “good feelings” that come when they make their promises to God, but they do themselves more harm than good. They like to “dream” about fulfilling their vows, but they never get around to doing it. They practice a make-believe religion that neither glorifies God nor builds Christian character.¹⁶


 **Application:** Explain how those self-centered motivations described above evidence themselves in one's worship (i.e., desire to alleviate guilt, to live up to personal expectations, to conform to religious customs, to identify with the masses, to respond to the emotional burden of the moment, to get out of a difficult situation, etc.)? open discussion


 What might keep us from following through on our promises to respond in a certain way? the cost of obedience, the passing of the momentary conviction, self-justification, etc. open discussion


 How would a return to God as the object and goal of worship (rather than, for example, merely “going through the motions” in a worship service or personal devotions) aid us in the way we responded? *it would keep us from being rash in our response but also compel us to respond; it would deepen and sharpen our response; it would motivate the fulfilling of that response*

 In what contexts would a believer be wise to make a vow to God regarding some worshipful response? *in response to a sermon (during the invitation perhaps—so many people aimlessly look around during that time when they could quite simply be praying in response to the challenge of the sermon), the musical worship, one's personal Bible reading, a conversation with a friend, homework from a Bible study, the Spirit's daily conviction and communion within your own spirit, etc.*

 What are some practical ways in which we can cultivate the practice of responding to God in worshipful obedience, both in “vowing” and then “paying what we have vowed”? *in personal devotions, spend some of the time thinking about how you will personally respond to the text; keep an application journal with daily entries detailing how you responded to God throughout that day; get accountability with a friend regarding a specific application; carry notecards with you to help you meditate upon and fulfill a particular application; set reminders on your phone or computer regarding a certain response; spend some time on Sunday afternoon outlining one or two responses to the Sunday sermons and Bible studies; review your sermon notes during the week in order to remind yourself and track your progress; open discussion*

 Read Genesis 28:20-22; Numbers 21:2; 30:3; 1 Samuel 1:11—What specific vows were offered to God in these verses? What specific situations prompted these vows? Considering both the warning in our passage and the examples in these verses, what lessons can be gleaned? *open discussion*

 From the following verses, what are the benefits of making and fulfilling one's “vows” to The Lord (Psalm 22:25; 50:14; 66:13; 116: 14, 18; Isaiah 19:21; Jonah 2:9)? *public testimony and praise, offering of thanksgiving, drawing near to God*

 Personally, what response of worshipful obedience do you need to make in light of what you have heard from God throughout this study of Ecclesiastes? *open discussion*

Transition: A final characteristic of reverent, God-fearing worship is found in verses 6-7. Wise worship is genuine.

GENUINENESS (vv. 6-7)

*“Suffer not thy mouth to cause thy flesh to sin,
neither say thou before the [messenger] that it was an error;
wherefore should God be angry at thy voice
and destroy the work of thine hands?
For in the multitude of dreams and many words
there are also divers vanities.
But fear thou God.”*

Hand-in-hand with the previous point is this one. Solomon has just warned against vowing a vow and not paying it, or making a decision and not fulfilling it. Now, he reveals the heart of the matter, which is a disingenuousness, insincerity, dishonesty, and hypocrisy in one's responsive worship.

The warning of verses 4-5 builds in verse 6. Solomon is not merely concerned that we pay what we have vowed, but that we simply worship God with realness and genuineness. The rash, hasty, and thoughtless worshipper of verse 2 is here revealed to be a worshipper, really in title only. When the rubber meets the road, this individual ducks out of any authentic involvement in worship, excusing his superficiality with, “It was an error, a mistake” (v. 6).¹⁷ What man calls a “mistake” (v. 6b), God calls a “sin” (v. 6a).

The true God-fearing worshipper is genuine before God, as is evidenced in his seriousness, attentiveness, thoughtfulness, meekness, and responsiveness. In contrast, the foolish and disingenuous worshipper who heartlessly “goes through the motions” is in danger of God's anger and judgment (v. 6; cf. 12:14; Acts 5:1-11).¹⁸

Illustration: Consider the following well-known anecdote:

The short film James 3 portrays a family of four getting ready for church on a Sunday morning. Even though the viewer cannot hear what the family members are saying, it is not hard to read their lips, or at least their attitudes. They wake up sleepy and grumpy. The dad stumbles over the laundry and kicks it out of the way. The older daughter argues with her mother about what she will (or will not) wear to church. The younger daughter spills her milk and cereal. Angry words are exchanged, especially when the dad slams on the brakes while the mom is trying to put on lipstick in the car.

As they get ready for church, no one in the family smiles or exchanges even one friendly word ... until they walk into church and it is time to put on a happy face. The mom and the dad smile at the first people they meet. Joyfully they take their places in the sanctuary. When they stand to sing, their eyes are closed in reverent adoration. As the film ends, the sound begins, and we can hear what they are singing: “Praise God from whom all blessings flow.”

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?¹⁹

We cannot hide anything from God, as we think we can from other people, but we try too frequently to do just that. We excuse our thoughtlessness, our triteness, our carelessness in worship. We exclaim, “It was a mistake,” “It was a bit much,” “It wasn’t necessary,” “I didn't mean it,” “It was unintentional and

inadvertent,” “It’s not a big deal” (v. 6; cf. Malachi). God doesn't want our “vain” words, which are as empty and futile as day-dreaming (v. 7), since He can see our heart and knows us as we really are.²⁰

Our external expression of worship must genuinely agree with our internal motivation for worship. **Illustration:** “The Boardwalk Chapel in Wildwood, New Jersey has a sign to help its [worshippers] remember this. The sign reads, ‘Sing it like you mean it,’ but the word ‘like’ is crossed out and replaced with the word ‘because’: ‘Sing it *because* you mean it.’²¹

The only solution for our innate hypocrisy and externalism is the “fear of God,” which is where Solomon again brings us at the end of verse 7. When we are rightly related to God and actively aware of our relationship to Him, sincerity and genuineness is fanned into a flame of authentic worship of God. Ryken explains this connection:

Charles Bridges defined the fear of God as “the grand fundamental of godliness.” To fear God is to recognize his might and majesty. It is to acknowledge that he is in Heaven and we are on earth, that he is God and we are not. It is to say, “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).

When we fear God in this way, we will come to worship with expectancy and awe. We will be ready to listen to what he says (he is God, after all). We will be careful what we say, limiting our speech to words that are pleasing to him. We will give God what he deserves, including whatever time or talent or treasure we have promised to give.²²

Application: How do we cultivate the fear of God so that we might genuinely, and thus safely, worship Him? How do we move beyond our natural self-centered externalism and wisely worship God? “Once again we can only cast ourselves on the mercy of God, pray that he will forgive us for everything we have failed to

do, and ask him to accept us through Jesus Christ. Jesus is the only one who ever kept all his promises to God, including his own vow to offer a holy sacrifice—the sacrifice of his body for our sins. By the mercy of Jesus, we are forgiven for all our failures. And now, by the grace of Jesus, we have help in keeping our commitments to God. When we pray for the grace to follow through, we are praying to a Savior who knows what it means to keep a commitment, who did everything he promised to the very death.”²³



Corporately, praise Jesus that He is always genuine and faithful in His commitment to us. Ask Him for the enablement to be genuine, fear-filled responders to the glory of God. Thank Him for the wisdom for worship that He’s provided in this passage and through His work on our behalf.

CONCLUSION

We must approach God reverently. “Ecclesiastes 5[:1-7] was written to help us take God more seriously when we worship. T. M. Moore has written a loose poetic paraphrase of these verses that can help us remember its spiritual lessons.

*How brazen and dishonest people are
with their religion. They will go as far
with it as suits their needs; so they attend
the services and sing the hymns, and when
they have to, give a little money to
the Lord. But do they live as one should do
who’s made a vow to God? Don’t kid yourself.
Among their friends their faith is on the shelf...*

*Remember, God knows everything.
He knows our hearts when we before him bring
our worship, and you can’t fool him. So take
a good look at yourself before you make
your next appearance before the Lord. And go
to listen, not to speak, for he will know
just what you need. Why, any fool can spout*

*a lovely prayer or sing a hymn about
his faith. His words are mindless, like a dream,
although to people looking on they seem
impressive. Not to God...*

*For words are cheap,
just like the dreams you have while you’re asleep.
God wants your heart, my son, not just a show.
Get right with him before you to him go.”²⁴*

ENDNOTES

¹ <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2011/05/awkward-moment-during-obama-toast-to-queen>

² Kidner, Derek. *The Message of Ecclesiastes*. Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1976. 52-53.

³ “The day of worship (Exod. 16:23; 20:8, 11), the place (Exod. 26:33–34), the offering (Lev. 6:25–27), the priests (Lev. 21:7) and the worshippers (2 Chr. 20:21) were all to be holy before the Lord” (Jim Winter, *Opening Up Ecclesiastes*, Opening Up Commentary [Leominster: Day One Publications, 2005], 68).

⁴ “This, however, is not just an Old Testament theme. Jesus drove the moneychangers from the Temple courts (Matt. 21:12–17). Paul commands Christians to examine themselves before coming to the table of the Lord, lest they eat the bread and drink the cup ‘in an unworthy manner’ (1 Cor. 11:27–28). The reverence and godly fear of Old Testament worship is reinforced in New Testament teaching (Heb. 12:28–29). And, of course, overriding all of this is the command: ‘You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy’ (Lev. 19:2)” (Ibid.).

⁵ J. Stafford Wright, “Ecclesiastes” In , in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 5: Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 1168.

⁶ Winter, 70.

⁷ Ibid., 71.

⁸ Duane A. Garrett, vol. 14, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993), 311.

⁹ R. C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2000), 68 quoted in Chan, Francis (2010-01-01). *Crazy Love: Overwhelmed by a Relentless God* (p. 24). David C Cook. Kindle Edition.

¹⁰ Biblical Studies Press, *The NET Bible First Edition; Bible. English. NET Bible.; The NET Bible* (Biblical Studies Press, 2006).

¹¹ “God did not require His people to make vows in order to be accepted by Him, but the opportunity was there for them to express their devotion if they felt led to do so (see Num. 30; Deut. 23:21–23; Acts 18:18)” (Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Satisfied*, “Be” Commentary Series [Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996], 19).

¹² “Because we don’t often think about the reality of who God is, we quickly forget that He is worthy to be worshipped and loved” (Chan, 28).

¹³ Chan, 26.

¹⁴ *Matthew Henry Commentary*, Vol. 5 p. 574 quoted in Winter, 73.

¹⁵ **Application:** Philip Ryken (Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*, Preaching the Word [Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2010], 125-126) writes,

It is much easier to make a promise than to keep it. People do this with God all the time, especially when they are bargaining with him in prayer. They say things like, “God, if only you will forgive me just this once, I swear I will never commit that sin again,” or “I promise that as soon as I get more money, I will start giving 10 percent back to you.” If you have ever offered a prayer like that—as many people have—then you also know how easy it is to forget what you promised! Before we know it, we are committing that same old sin again or being just as selfish with our money as ever, in which case it would be better if we had never made God a promise at all [cf. Matthew 21:28-31]....

Another way to say this is, don’t play games with God! If you promise him something, be a man or a woman of your word. In some cases this means that it would be better for us not to promise God anything at all. But the Bible assumes that there are times when it is appropriate for us to take spiritual vows, like the vows of covenant matrimony, for example, or the promises people

make when they become members of a church. When we are considering a vow, here is some good advice for us to follow, from the worthy old preacher Charles Bridges:

*“A solemn engagement advisedly made with God is a transaction needing much prayer and consideration. It should rest on the clear warrant of God’s word. It should concern a matter really important, suitable, and attainable. It should be so limited, as to open a way for disentanglement under unforeseen contingencies, or altered circumstances [Charles Bridges, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes* (1860; repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1961), p. 102].”*

¹⁶ Wiersbe, 19.

¹⁷ “The term מַלְאָךְ (mal’akh, “messenger”) refers to a temple priest (e.g., Mal 2:7...). The priests recorded what Israelite worshipers vowed (Lev 27:14-15). When an Israelite delayed in fulfilling a vow, a priest would remind him to pay what he had vowed” (NET Bible note #16 in verse 6).

¹⁸ “This is why people sometimes say that ‘the road to Hell is paved with good intentions’ (Ryken, 126).

¹⁹ Ibid., 119.

²⁰ Commenting on the similar statement in verse 3, Charles Bridges writes, “The fewness of the words is not the main concern; but whether they be the words of the heart” (Bridges, 102 quoted in Ibid., 124).

²¹ Ibid.

²² Bridges, 109 quoted by Ibid., 127.

²³ Ibid., 126.

²⁴ Ibid., 127-28.