

*When our granddaughter Anne was young (she is now two-and-a-half) we used to play a game. It is called hide and seek. You don't have to move. You just put your hands over your eyes. When Anne could see us, we were there. When she couldn't see us, we were gone.*  
You cannot play this game with adults.

They know that when they can't see you it doesn't mean you are gone.  
When it comes to God, many people are spiritual babies. Maybe we all are.  
We think that if we cannot see Him, He isn't there.  
Even when we insist that we don't think in this childlike way, we act like He isn't there.  
Too often, we live like God isn't there, doesn't see, doesn't hear. Even on Sunday.

### **Do you know that God watches what you do and hears what you say?**

Ecclesiastes 5:1-7 is very different from what we have been reading thus far in Ecclesiastes. It is filled with imperative verbs, commands.  
This text before us this morning is a departure from Solomon's investigation of life. Why?

He begins his book with the thesis of the book. **Ecclesiastes 1:2**

Next, he asks the salient question of the book. **Ecclesiastes 1:3**

A young lady yesterday said to me, about life, “Why would you want to live it if you don't get anything?”  
Exactly. This is what Solomon is asking.

He then shows us that, in this world, nothing is ever really new and no progress is made.

No one really makes a significant difference, and no one remembers you. **Ecclesiastes 1:13-14**

Solomon shows us this next by explaining that he had applied his wisdom to life and sought success.

He was more successful than nearly any person who has ever lived.

And yet we read his assessment after it all in **Ecclesiastes 2:11**.

He looks at wisdom and hard work and finds that in these also there is no profit, no gain. **Ecclesiastes 2:22-23**

You see, life in God's world, under the sun, is not about getting more, making a profit, being remembered. It is about receiving gifts from God. **Ecclesiastes 2:24-26, 12-13**

Solomon helps us to see that through all the different moments of life there is something timeless.

There is something about people that we must recognize. God has put eternity in our hearts.

**Ecclesiastes 3:10-11** Eternity, but we cannot really figure it out on our own.

He next looks at life, and we all die. We come from the dust; we go back to the dust.

And with all the injustice and wickedness in the world, maybe it's better not to be born.

He considers the guy who works hard and the bum and the man with no family and the king.

He finds that their lives are all vanity (hebel) and chasing the wind. It is better to have a friend.

**Ecclesiastes 4:16** For the greatest and for the least it is all chasing the wind.

Solomon has been observing all the vanity (hebel) that is life and all the chasing after the wind that people do.

You could draw the conclusion that, because nothing lasts, I should just do whatever I feel like doing.

Recognizing the difficulty of figuring life out could cause a person to give up.

Or, more likely the struggle to find meaning could become an excuse to follow your urges.

An amateur philosopher could interpret Solomon as promoting nihilism.

Nihilism is the rejection of all religious and moral principles, in the belief that life is meaningless

And nihilism necessarily leads to immorality, selfishness, and abandoning ethical behavior.

Solomon clearly recognizes this temptation and so he stops his investigation to deliver some commands.

These commands, and there are essentially two, represent timeless wisdom.

We have been shown by Solomon three thematic golden nuggets of wisdom discovered in his exploration.

1. Life is not gain. It is a gift.
2. Nothing lasts but everything matters.
3. People are more important than success.

Now we are going to be introduced to another thematic golden nugget, in the form of a simple command.

4. Fear God. We get it twice. Two slightly different emphases.

These two commands are desperately needed today, as they have been for 3,000 years.

There is no place in Ecclesiastes where we find so many imperatives in this few verses.  
So, an immediate lesson: Solomon wants us to do something, or to not do something.

The structure, organization, or shape of these 7 verses form a unit. The unit is carefully crafted.  
I would like you to look into your Bibles to see it.  
Now, you all must become, for a moment, macro-grammatical geeks.

Verses 1-3 form the first half addressing “when you go into the house of God”  
Verses 4-7 form the second half addressing “when you pay a vow to God.”

Do you see this? It is the same in Hebrew.  
But in English and in Hebrew you can discover something deeper.  
The two halves mirror one another.

Verses 1 and 4-5 reflect one another: They both issue a command so that we avoid being fools before God.  
Guard your steps. Pay what you vow.

Then verses 2 and 6 reflect one another: Both warn against speaking rashly with your mouth before God.  
“Do not be rash with your mouth” “Don’t let your mouth lead you into sin.”

Then verses 3 and 7a reflect one another; Both warn against depending upon dreams or visions.  
Apparently dreams follow words and lead to more unhelpful words.

Finally, the last little part of verse 7 succinctly sums up the entire lesson. In Hebrew it is three words.  
“So (therefore, thus) fear God.”

Therefore, following the text we are going to look at two issues:

How does one enter the house of God?

How does one make and keep promises to God?

And for each of these questions we will cover the same three issues:

How do we avoid being foolish before God?

How should we avoid being rash with our speech before God?

How shall we avoid unwise dependance upon dreams or visions?

## **I. Be careful as you worship.**

### **Ecclesiastes 5:1-3**

Literally, “Guard your steps when you go into the house of God.”

There can be little doubt that Solomon is writing about the Temple in Jerusalem.

So how does this apply to us today? We don’t have the Temple, anywhere on earth.

Well, the application is not difficult.

The Jewish people gathered in the Temple to worship God.

And they came to offer their service to God, and to make sacrifices to God.

It is not so different for us as we come to church on Sunday, or other days of the week.

Thus, the application is clear and direct. Solomon’s commands for worship apply to us, here, today.

The first command, then, is this, “Guard your steps” when you come to worship.

What does this mean? You might say, “be careful how you walk.”

And now a New Testament passage comes readily to mind. **Ephesians 5:15-21.**

Worship is not for me to be noticed, or a chore to endure, or an opportunity for entertainment.

Worship is about God, with God’s people, guided by God’s words, filled with God’s Spirit.

Moreover, we can see in Ecclesiastes 5:1 that listening to God must be our priority. Why? Next verse.

Now the second command (5:2), “Do not be rash with your words or your heart... before God.”

The word means rash, unwise, quick, hasty with your mouth, what you say.

Many people want to speak about God in the way that suits them, rather than learning what suits God.

*In a service I attended recently, a person in the congregation got up to lead prayer.*

*This man began his prayer with, “Hey God, buddy...”*

*I wondered if he actually knew who he was addressing.*

Yes, God has made enemies into His friends, His children. That is true.

But still Jesus taught us to pray, “Our Father who is in heaven...” He is still God Almighty.

Did you know that speaking makes it difficult to listen?

How many of you find yourselves thinking about what you want to say when someone else is speaking?

Often, listening to God means that we put away what it is that we want to say. This is hard.

But it is the only way to avoid sounding foolish before God.

And what do we really have to contribute? “God is in heaven and you are on earth.”

Meaning that our perspective, our contribution, might be comparatively insignificant.

Not unimportant or useless, but less than God’s.

And the third command for worship in God’s house, “Let your words be few.” (5:2d)

Why? “For a dream comes with much business and a fool’s voice with many words.”

What could Solomon be writing about?

Well, this sounds a lot like Paul’s instruction to the Corinthian church in 1 Corinthians 12-14.

His subject is the same, corporate worship, and the problems seem the same.

People in the congregation wanted to be thought of as prophets and speak in tongues.

The three chapters in 1 Corinthians comprise one long rebuke.

Stop abusing God’s gifts: tongues and prophesy in particular.

You see? For 3,000 years places of worship have been filled with people who want to speak for God.

I have been in professional ministry for most of 40 years.

I cannot tell you how many times someone has come to me and said, “God told me...”

But did He? Maybe. But do people who say that realize what they are claiming?

Do you know the dangers of claiming that you have a special word from the Lord?

In the OT, if someone falsely claimed to be a prophet the penalty was death.

It makes me tremble.

I do not what to speak with “a fool’s voice.”

Often the truth is that a person is saying what they think or feel, that’s fine.

But they are doing so as if it is a word from God. That is dangerous.

This is a huge problem for pastors.

We are supposed to say what God says.

How do we know? Well, it had better be here in this book!

I had better spend long hours listening to God before I claim to know what He says.

## II. Be careful with what you promise.

### Ecclesiastes 5:4-7

“When you make a vow to God, do not delay in paying it.”

What is Solomon writing about here?

Well, it is essential to understand that usually, in the OT, vows to God meant offerings.

This was certainly true in the context of Temple worship.

And the language of verse 4-5 only makes this more certain.

The logic here could be applied to any promise made to God about anything.

But clearly the first application is to offerings.

And Temple offerings were required of the people of Israel.

You can read about the offerings and sacrifices required in the book of Leviticus.

They were extensive and required travel to the Tabernacle or Temple, or the sending of a servant.

The tithe, the basic offering, was 10%.

This is what the word *tithe* means, one tenth.

But there were more sacrifices required, especially if some sins were committed.

By some estimates the average Israelite in Solomon’s day was required to give 24% to the Lord.

Now, you might say, “Pastor! That is a lot and I’m not even close. Are you saying that I’m disobedient?”

No. Nor is that what Solomon is saying.

What is the problem he is addressing?

Some people are saying that they are going to give, and then they are not following through. That’s bad.

Some people are pretending that they are giving a lot but not actually doing so. That’s bad.

He tells the reader, “Better to vow nothing than to vow (or pretend) and not pay.”

Jesus dealt with a similar problem 900 years later. **Matthew 6:1-4**

In Ecclesiastes 5:6 Solomon again warns us, in a command, about our speech.

Do not say one thing and do another.

Do not accept a position of service in the church or anywhere else and then fail to follow through.

“Why make God angry?”

All these things are not about impressing people.

It is God who is watching all that we do.

Then, in 5:7 we are again warned about relying on dreams.

This is the man who says, “Well yes I did make that promise, but the Lord has shown me otherwise.”

Don’t ever use “God spoke to me” as an excuse to disobey God or to not fulfill a promise.

Do not spiritualize what ought to be basic ethical behavior in obedience to God.

Consider Jesus’ teaching in **Matthew 5:33-37**.

So, what is the solution? To not give at all? No.

Some of you have just been nominated to serve as an officer here at Brooklyn Church.

I guess I’m an idiot here warning you not to accept that nomination unless you will fulfill your obligation.

But that’s true. You knew it.

Realize, however that you were nominated because someone thought that God has gifted you to serve.

It might be a door opening to great blessing for you and others.

Notice that Jesus assumes that you will be giving, to help poor people, to support the church.

He assumes that you will be serving.

Give and serve without public promises, without drawing attention, with a joyful heart.

Do you give? Do you give 10%.

It is a good goal to have, or even more if you can.

In just a few more verses we will read **Ecclesiastes 5:10**. We are going to look into this in-depth next week.

Last week we were reminded that “the love of money is the root of all evil.” (1 Timothy 6:10)

But how? How can I make myself love money less and love God more?

David Gibson in his book Living Life Backwards has a simple solution.

How to combat our natural love of money?

*Ecclesiastes – and indeed the whole Bible – has a beautifully simple solution. Here is how to sever the root, stop the rot, and kill the evil: spend your money on others. Give it away. Do it regularly, gladly, generously – and you will be happy.*

People will sometimes ask me how much God wants them to give. Honestly, I don’t know.

But what I do say is this. Give more than you did last month.

Give so that you will be made to trust God more.

Give until you realize it is helping you to love money less.

God wants us to give, to church, to family, and to others...

because it is good for us and it is an investment in the Kingdom of God and in our own future.

*Randy Alcorn writes in his book The Treasure Principle,*

*“You cannot take it with you, but you can send it on ahead.*

Why do you come to worship on Sunday?

There are many bad reasons: to be seen, to feel better, for entertainment, to comment on the preacher.

There is really one big good reason: because God is worthy of your worship, your serving, and your giving.

Solomon concludes this little section with a final simple command, ““So (therefore, thus) fear God.”

As you get up on Sunday, as you get ready for church, as you eat breakfast, as you drive to the church...

When you are here talking with others, as you participate in Sunday School, as you worship...

As you sing, as you give, as you listen to the Scriptures... realize that God is here.

He is here the whole week. He is everywhere. We ought to have this attitude all the time.

But on Sunday morning, of all times, God ought to seem to you real, present, worth honoring and listening to.

He is real and really here, “So fear God.”