

## “Watch Your Mouth!” (Ecclesiastes 5:1-9)<sup>1</sup>

Whenever I go to the airport to pick someone up, I park outside of the arrival terminal. My goal is always the same: to avoid paying to park my car. So I wait as long as I can near the curb of the airline pickup area. While waiting I will often hear a recording over the loudspeaker, “The white zone is for loading and unloading only. No parking.” Now, mind you, I am waiting to load up; however, if my passengers are delayed and I am waiting at the curb too long, a police officer usually approaches my car and asks me to move on. Being the law-abiding citizen that I am, I oblige him. However, I must confess that I have been known to make the loop at Seattle-Tacoma Airport and begin this vicious cycle all over again.

Can I be honest? I wish there were some way to announce over a loudspeaker system outside every church, “The worship zone is for learning, listening, and changing only. No parking! Be alert! Listen carefully. Truth will be deposited in your head that is designed to change your life.” But chances are good that even if a loudspeaker made such an announcement, the same thing would occur—folks would still “park” and turn a deaf ear to the recording and give pastoral police officers the runaround.<sup>2</sup>

In Eccl 5:1-9, Solomon pens some convicting words.<sup>3</sup> He is going to sober us up. He may even make us feel badly. Now, I hope that you don’t come to church to be made to feel happy. The Bible isn’t a book about happiness; it is a book about holiness. This means sometimes the Bible will say things that you and I don’t like. Yet, if our goal is to become progressively holy, we will welcome the hard words of Scripture. For hard words make soft people and soft words make hard people.<sup>4</sup> In these nine verses, Solomon shares two prohibitions that will enable us to exercise holiness and worship the right God in the right way. He wants us to see that *God seeks an open heart and a closed mouth*.

**1. Don’t be rash with your words (5:1-3).** In these first three verses, Solomon challenges his readers to prepare their hearts, minds, and mouths for worship. The idea is: before we worship, we must check our mental attitude and motive. In 5:1 Solomon writes, “**Guard your steps<sup>5</sup> as you go to the house of God and draw near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools; for they do not know they are doing evil.**” This verse is rather meaty because it encapsulates two important issues: our preparation for worship and our participation in worship. The first emphasis is upon our preparation for worship. Since Solomon built the Old Testament temple, he was an expert on how to approach God. It took him seven years and 153,000 men to build the temple, so he knows a thing or two.<sup>6</sup> In 5:1, Solomon’s first words are a command to “guard your steps.”<sup>7</sup> This is a common expression in our culture. When you exit a bus, the bus driver will say, “Please watch your step.” When you are getting off a plane, a flight attendant will generally stand at the cockpit door and tell you, “Thank you for flying with us and please watch your step.” When someone tells you to watch your step they are warning you of a potential danger just ahead that you had better pay very close attention to. When you were growing up, was there ever a time when you became angry and spoke rash and disrespectful words to your parents? What was their response? If your parents were like my parents, you probably heard these words: “Watch your step, young man (or young woman).”<sup>8</sup>

Solomon warns you to “guard your step as you go to the house of God.” This seems out of the ordinary to our modern culture. We have warnings about sin, temptation, and unbelief, but a warning about how to worship seems unusual to our ears. Our problem is that we do not take worship seriously enough. We tend to think that as long as we are worshiping the Lord, it does not really matter how we worship. But the Scriptures teach otherwise. So sacred was God’s house that the Lord said to Moses in Lev 15:31: “Thus you shall keep the sons of Israel separated from their uncleanness, so that they will not die in their uncleanness by their defiling My tabernacle that is among them.” God at times actually took the lives of those who failed to come to His house in the right way, as a warning to the whole nation that they were dealing with a holy God.

My mom spent the first twenty years of her life in the Roman Catholic Church. When she became a Christian at twenty and began attending an evangelical church, she marveled at how lax evangelicals seemed to be in the church worship service. My mom saw people eating and drinking in church. She noticed people talking during the worship service, coming in late, and going in and out during worship. Initially, my mom didn't know what to think. It seemed so irreverent. It took her years to understand the evangelical culture. So which worship culture is correct—the formal Catholic or Orthodox Church or the informal Protestant church? The answer is both can be right! Now please don't misunderstand what I am trying to say. I recognize that in the church age there is nothing hallowed about a building. The Bible tells us that you and I are temples of the Holy Spirit.<sup>9</sup> However, when the church gathers for the purpose of worship, there ought to be a sense of God's holiness and abiding presence.

This past week, Lori and I discussed with our children why it can be a good idea to fold our hands and close our eyes when we pray. The principle is to show respect for God and be free from distraction. We can't put away some of the distractions that are in front of us so it can be helpful to close our eyes in prayer and in worship. Likewise, God wants us to enter into worship prepared and focused. Men are good at preparing. They'll stay up late Friday night getting ready for Saturday's fishing trip. They'll spend hours organizing a basement workshop before beginning a project. They'll devote a week preparing for a tailgate party at the football stadium. And they'll study catalogs all summer looking for the perfect fall hunting jacket. The men of the Old Testament were charged by God with certain preparations as well—preparations for worship. At the first Passover, men were to select a perfect lamb, slaughter it, put its blood on the doorpost, roast the meat, and make sure the house was cleansed of leaven. Do men—or women—spend as much time preparing for worship today?<sup>10</sup> What kinds of preparation should be made? Go to bed early and wake up early. Meditate on Scripture. Pray with your kids before church. Teach them the importance of service. Talk about the Lord on your way to the church. This Saturday, try to keep Sunday in mind. Try to give it the kind of preparation that will make it a day to remember. *God seeks an open heart and a closed mouth.*

The famous researcher, George Barna, recently said, “Having devoted more than two decades of my life and all of my professional skills to studying and working with ministries of all types, I am now convinced that the greatest hope for the local church lies in raising godly children.”<sup>11</sup> Barna is exactly right! If the family breaks down, the core of society is demolished. It has been said again and again that the church is one generation from extinction. Therefore, it is imperative that we train our children how to worship God and love and serve the church.

5:1b alludes to participation in worship. Solomon says, “Draw near to listen...” Solomon has just indicted “Back Row Baptists.” It is so interesting to me that some Christians have to get to church early to make sure that they get that back row or near that back row. Instead of the front rows filling up first and moving backward, we start in the back and move forward. It is like we want to get in the church building but just barely in it. Solomon says draw near to listen. It is not draw near to sing louder. It is not draw near so that you can pray longer. It is not draw near so you can be closer to your friends so you can talk throughout the service together. No, it is draw near so that you can listen.

The “sacrifice of fools” refers to speaking foolishly.<sup>12</sup> Solomon warns us of hearing too little and talking too much. The word “listen” carries double force: “listening with the intention of obeying.” God wants us to hear from Him. He *seeks an open heart and a closed mouth*. Thus, if you have walked out of church not hearing from God then you have not worshiped. You have attended church but you have not worshiped. You can check off your obligation card “I did it” but you did not worship. Worship can only occur when you hear from God. Today, will you make every effort to hear from God? Will you open up your heart and close your mouth?

Now that we've walked the walk, we have to talk the talk. We must talk cautiously to the Lord as well as walk cautiously before Him.<sup>13</sup> In 5:2 Solomon writes, **"Do not be hasty in word or impulsive in thought to bring up a matter in the presence of God. For God is in heaven and you are on the earth; therefore let your words be few."** When I was growing up, my parents would say, "Watch your tone of voice!" They wanted to remind me that they were in authority over me and I needed to respect them. Likewise, God is saying, "Believer, you need to remember who your Father is." It is unwise to hastily and impulsively give God a piece of your mind. First of all, you will be giving God a piece of your mind that you can ill afford to lose. Second, Solomon declares that "God is in heaven and you are on the earth." Many people assume Solomon is saying that God is way up there in heaven and we are way down here on earth, so we'd better listen well. In actuality, this is a statement of perspective, not distance. God is in the realm of the infinite. He alone hears the inaudible. He alone sees the invisible. That's the reason we are to be calm and quiet.<sup>14</sup> What a putdown; what a blow to our egos! In five simple words—"you are on the earth"—the author shoots down any chance for us to think "more highly of [ourselves] than [we] ought to think" (Rom 12:3). What we consider to be great (i.e., "the earth") Solomon and God conceive as being not merely small, but insignificant (in comparison to heaven). We are merely on earth—an average-sized planet in our relatively small solar system, but a planet that few humans have circumnavigated and even fewer have been able to leave for brief ventures into (near, not deep) space.<sup>15</sup>

Solomon wants you and me to understand that God is not your "buddy next door," He's not the "big man upstairs." He's the infinite, eternal, unchangeable God who is full of wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth. Yes, He's also a faithful friend and a caring Father, but He's always more than that too. He expects us to take Him seriously as the chief authority in our lives.

Since we can't understand everything, we should be careful about what we say to God. Do you know why? In 5:3 Solomon writes, **"For the dream comes through much effort and the voice of a fool through many words."** Just as hard work produces sleep and dreams, so a fool produces many words and much pontificating. In contrast, Solomon says that men of effort are known for their dreams. They work hard and they are silent. Can you say to God that you are mixed up and need some answers? Certainly. God wants us to be honest with Him. But He also wants us to be careful how we approach Him. You have to watch your tone of voice. We may ask why but not with anger or disrespect. There can be no accusations as though God were not in control or bitterness as though we sit in judgment over Him.<sup>16</sup> God is free to do what He wants, whenever He wants. Remember, He is God. *God seeks an open heart and a closed mouth.*

[Why should you not be rash with your words? Because God is God and you are not. Solomon now shares a second prohibition.]

**2. Don't be foolish with your words (5:4-9).** Solomon warns us against foolish speech and making foolish commitments. In 5:4 he writes, **"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!"** Solomon says that if you make a vow to God, then you'd better do what you said you would do. He begins with the assumption that at some point or another most people will make a vow to God ("when you..."). Yet, he follows up this assumption with a prohibition: "do not be late in paying it." He then concludes 5:4 with a short, direct command: "Pay what you vow!" This short sentence is literally translated, "WHAT YOU VOWED, pay [it]!" The emphasis is upon the vow. Solomon, in essence, labels the person "a fool" who fails to pay his vow on time.<sup>17</sup> Think about this. People make vows all the time. People are baptized. People become members of a church. Parents dedicate their children. Spouses commit their lives to one another. People make commitments to read God's Word and to maintain their purity. Yet, all of us have broken vows that we have made before God and others. Maybe you have even said, "God, if you get me out of this mess I promise that I am going to stop this or start that or serve you with my life. I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but God remembers these vows and holds us to them.

Therefore, Solomon's suggestion in 5:5-6 is, **"It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. 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?"** Solomon says, "It would be better for us to keep quiet and not utter anything rash or foolish." This is why I challenge people who are contemplating marriage and church membership. I want to make sure they understand what they are committing to. Please listen carefully: I believe that there are many Christians today who are experiencing God's judgment in their lives because of their refusal to follow through with their commitments to Him. That judgment may not come in the form of physical ailments and death, though it certainly can.<sup>18</sup> It may instead come by means of God destroying the work of our hands. That is, God may take our goals and aspirations and efforts to succeed and just turn those things into dust. Or He may allow us to prosper but make us miserable in our prosperity.<sup>19</sup>

In 5:7 Solomon writes, **"For in many dreams and in many words there is emptiness. Rather, fear God."**<sup>20</sup> Solomon returns to the idea of dreams. His conclusion is that dreams and words can be nothing but emptiness—*hebel*. Thus, he tells us to fear God. To fear God is to stand in awe of Him. It is not to quake into oblivion or to become comatose. It is to acknowledge His worth. It is to respond to Him with obedience and gratitude. *God seeks an open heart and a closed mouth.*

Solomon closes out this section in 5:8-9 with an exhortation for us to watch what we think in reference to humans. **"If you see oppression of the poor and denial<sup>21</sup> of justice and righteousness in the province, do not be shocked at the sight; for one official watches over another official, and there are higher officials over them. After all, a king who cultivates the field is an advantage to the land."** These are peculiar verses that don't seem to fit in this chapter. Yet, it seems best to place these verses with 5:1-7 instead of with 5:10-20. What, if any, connections are there between the two sets of verses? In what way(s) are we to compare our relationship to earthly rulers with how we are to act in the presence of God? It seems that Solomon is suggesting that we would not be so foolish as to chatter boldly before imperfect but powerful government leaders about problems we encounter. If not, then why do we chatter incessantly before the all-powerful God?<sup>22</sup> He is sovereign and is in complete control.

While we search for excellence in many areas of living, let us not forget to pursue it also in our worship by paying attention, paying our vows, and paying respect. It might be easy to conclude from this message that a Christian should pray silent and short prayers, should never make public commitments, and should cower in absolute fear of God. But to come to that conclusion would be to miss the whole point. Rather, what we should do is to be sincere when we speak, to think through our commitments before we make them, and to never lose our reverence and awe for God.

As I close this message, I would like to speak to my friend, Don Prozora, who is sitting in the front row in a hospital chair. Don, this message exemplifies you like no one else I know. When your son died one year ago this month, you worshiped God and trusted Him with all your heart and soul. When your dad died this past month you worshiped God and trusted Him. When you were diagnosed with terminal liver cancer, you worshiped God and trusted Him with all your heart. The week that the diagnosis was made, you were at the front door of our church serving as a greeter. Each and every week you have sought to come to church because you love the Lord Jesus and this church family. You have been a man of supernatural faith, perseverance, and confidence in God. Honestly, I've never met anyone like you. You have challenged me and inspired me and countless others. You have taught our church how to enjoy life and die well. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. You have taught me what it means to have *an open heart and a closed mouth*.

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### **Scripture References**

Ecclesiastes 5:1-9

Deuteronomy 23:21-23

1 Samuel 1:9-2:11

Psalm 15:4

Proverbs 10:19; 12:22; 13:3

Jeremiah 7:21-23

Matthew 5:33-37; 12:36-37

### **Study Questions**

1. What religious practices do I find to be empty or meaningless in my life (5:1)? Which are most meaningful? What steps can I take to make the “empty” aspects of my relationship with God more meaningful?
2. What steps do I take on Saturday evening and early Sunday morning to ready myself for worship (5:2-3)? How can I improve my preparation for worshipping God? How can I help my family prepare to worship God? What steps can I take to help me concentrate on glorifying God instead of concentrating on the worries and problems that often distract during worship?
3. Have I made any vows before the Lord recently (5:4-5)? What actions am I taking to fulfill my vow? Am I a man or woman of my word? What examples can I provide that demonstrate my integrity? What steps can I take to become a promise keeper instead of a promise breaker?
4. Do I talk too much (5:6-7)? Would other people say that I talk too much? If so, what do I tend to talk about? Is all my talk necessary? How can I encourage another person not to talk too much? Why is it so important to be slow to speak? Meditate on James 1:19.
5. Do I have a healthy respect for God (5:7)? Am I in awe of Him? What attribute or characteristic am I particularly astounded by? How have I learned to respect and honor my governing authorities (5:8-9)? Read Romans 13:1-7 and 1 Peter 2:13-17.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This sermon is dedicated to my good friend, Don Prozora, who is dying of liver cancer. This is most likely Don's last Sunday at church. I can't think of a more appropriate message that exemplifies Don's life.

<sup>2</sup> This illustration idea came from Charles R. Swindoll, *Living on the Ragged Edge: Coming to Terms with Reality*, Bible Study Guide (Fullerton, CA: Insight for Living, 1986), 149.

<sup>3</sup> This passage seems to be an interlude in the book of Ecclesiastes. So far in the book, Solomon has been focused on the horizontal, but now he focuses in on the vertical. This chapter presents something of an interlude. Up to this point, Solomon has been merely giving his observations. But now he gives a series of exhortations. So far, he has only showed us the way the world IS. Now he tells us what we are to DO on the basis of how the world is. (1) Before worship (5:1a); (2) during worship (5:1b-3); and (3) after worship (5:4-9).

<sup>4</sup> I first heard this quote from Pastor Mark Driscoll of Mars Hill Church in Ballard, WA.

<sup>5</sup> The commands of Eccl 5:1 and that of 5:7 together form an inclusio around this section, emphasizing the point that God is God and we are not. Barry C. Davis, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, Multnomah Biblical Seminary unpublished class notes.

<sup>6</sup> See 1 Kgs 6:38 and 7:1.

<sup>7</sup> This is an idiom for "be careful what you do." The NET Study Notes write, "This is a compound figure: 'foot' is a metonymy for 'step,' and 'step' is a metonymy for 'action' (e.g., Job 12:5; 23:11; 31:5; Pss 119:59, 101, 105; Prov 1:16; 3:23; 4:26-27; 6:18; 19:2; Isa 58:13; 59:7; Jer 14:10).

<sup>8</sup> David Jeremiah, *Searching for Heaven on Earth* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 108.

<sup>9</sup> See Paul's words in 1 Cor 6:19: "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own?" Cf. 1 Cor 3:16 and 2 Cor 6:16 where Paul speaks of the local church as God's temple.

<sup>10</sup> David Jeremiah, "Turning Point," 1/18/2008.

<sup>11</sup> David Jeremiah, "They Walked with Him: The Little Children," *Today's Turning Point* 2/9-10/2008.

<sup>12</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Ecclesiastes: Total Life* (Chicago: Moody, 1979), 74. See Hos 14:2; Heb 13:15.

<sup>13</sup> Jeremiah, *Searching for Heaven on Earth*, 109.

<sup>14</sup> Swindoll, *Living on the Ragged Edge*, 152-153.

<sup>15</sup> Davis, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*.

<sup>16</sup> Tommy Nelson, *The Problem of Life with God* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2002), 74-75.

<sup>17</sup> Davis, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*. The content of 5:4 (Heb. 5:3) is similar in meaning and intent to that of Num 30:2 and Deut 23:21, as the following chart reveals:

Eccl. 5:4 (NASB) "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!"	Num. 30:2 (NASB) "If a man makes a vow to the LORD, or takes an oath to bind himself with a binding obligation, he shall not violate his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth."	Deut. 23:21 (NASB) "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."
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<sup>18</sup> See the cases of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11) and the Corinthian church (1 Cor 11:27-34).

<sup>19</sup> See also Michael P. Andrus, "In Search of Excellence in Worship" (Eccl 5:1-7): unpublished sermon notes.

<sup>20</sup> The phrase "fear God" also occurs in Eccl 3:14; 7:18; 8:12, 13; and 12:13.

<sup>21</sup> Davis, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, writes, "The word translated by the NASB here as 'denial' (*gazel*) is consistently translated by the NASB as 'robbery' (or the like) in each of the five other occurrences of this noun in Scripture (Lev 6:2; Isa 61:8; Ezek. 18:18; Ezek 22:29; Ps 62:1). The verb form of this noun (*gazel*) is variously translated as 'to seize,' 'to take by force,' 'to tear away,' and 'to rob.' Thus, the word here translated as 'denial' should be understood to convey a sense of forcefulness with it. In other words, by using this noun, the author graphically portrays a situation in which "justice and righteousness" have been ripped away from people against their will.

<sup>22</sup> Davis, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*.