



ECCLESIASTES 5:1-7

1 Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they are doing evil. 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. 3 For a dream comes with much business, and a fool's voice with many words. 4 When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow. 5 It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. 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? 7 For when dreams increase and words grow many, there is vanity; but God is the one you must fear.

STRUCTURE

- I. **Fear God in your approach (1-3)**
 - a. Obedience is better than hypocritical sacrifice (1)
 - b. Reverent words are better than rash words (2)
 - c. Dreams and words: images of restless striving (3)

- II. **Fear God in your promises (4-7)**
 - a. Faithfulness is better than empty vows (4-5)
 - b. Reverent words are better than unkept vows (6)
 - c. Dreams and words revisited: vanity vs. the fear of God (7)

GENERAL COMMENTARY:

Beginning in 3:1–15, Solomon introduced the theme of the *fear of God* in light of His sovereign rule over times and seasons. From 3:16–4:16, he turned to the hard realities that seem to call God's sovereignty into question: injustice, oppression, and ceaseless toil. In 5:8–6:12, the Preacher will revisit these painful themes. But before he does, he pauses at the center of the unit (5:1–7) to emphasize worship. If life is filled with enigmas and frustrations, how should we live? By recognizing our limits and honoring the God who rules over every time, season, and circumstance. At the heart of Ecclesiastes—and at the heart of life—is reverent worship of the sovereign King.

Yet not all worship pleases Him. Fools multiply words in prayers and vows as though God can be manipulated by religious chatter. Like the workaholic of chapter 4, the “religi-holic” of this section strives in vain. Their lips overflow, their vows collapse, and their rituals reek of hypocrisy. They give God words and ceremonies, but not their hearts—and God is not impressed. Sacrifice without sincerity is sin in disguise. Worship divorced from reverence is not worship at all.

True worship is marked by fearful reverence. This is not the *slavish terror* of a beaten servant cringing before a cruel master, but the trembling awe of creatures who know their place before the Sovereign Lord. It means watching our steps, weighing our words, and walking humbly before the One who “is in heaven” while we “are on earth” (5:2). He alone governs times and seasons, and He alone deserves our trust.

In the end, reverent worship is not just the center of this literary unit; it is the center of life itself. Everything else is vapor. What gives life true weight is the fear of God.

VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENTARY:

1 Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they are doing evil.

—“Walk prudently when you go into the house of God” (NKJV); “As you enter the house of God, keep your ears open and mouth shut” (NLT); “Be careful what you do when you go into the house of God” (NET).

—The *Theological Wordbook of the OT* on “Guard” identifies these possible nuances: (1) Careful attention to the law or duty, e.g., Deut. 11:32; (2) Guarding or keeping something safe, e.g., Gen. 2:15; (3) Personal discipline with lips, actions, or lifestyle, e.g., Prov. 13:3; (4) Regard/reverence, e.g., Ps. 31:6; (5) Preserving/storing up, e.g., Mal. 2:7).

—Since the Preacher employs imagery of “steps”, he uses it as metaphor for lifestyle. We must guard our way of life and manner of coming before God. This best aligns with (3), while also including (1) and (4). We are being exhorted to live a life of wisdom, obedience, and reverence when we come before God—not the folly of careless speech or empty ritual.

—“steps”: The term may also carry a literal sense—one’s physical approach to the temple, suggesting reverence in gathered worship. But in Wisdom Literature, “steps” typically functions metaphorically for a person’s way of life or conduct (e.g., Prov 4:26–27; 5:21; 14:15). The immediate context supports this broader sense, since the Preacher goes on to stress carefulness in speech (vv. 2–3) and action (vv. 4–7). Thus, “guard your steps” warns not only against careless entry into God’s house but against careless living before Him.

—“house of God”:

- For ancient Israel, this phrase referred most immediately to the temple in Jerusalem, the meeting place between God and His people. In Christ, however, the locus of God’s presence has shifted: Christ Himself is the cornerstone that the builders rejected (Eph 2:20; 1 Pet 2:4–7), and the church is now God’s living temple.
- Accordingly, Christians apply these verses more broadly to speak of our approach to corporate worship—whether in homes or large gatherings—as well as to the whole-of-life worship that Paul commends in Romans 12:1–2.

—“To draw near”: This is classic biblical language for corporate worship:

- Ex. 19:22: “Also let the priests who come near to the LORD consecrate themselves, lest the LORD break out against them.”
- Isa. 29:13: “This people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me.”
- Heb. 4:16: “Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”
- Heb. 10:19–25: “Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water... And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”

—In the context of corporate worship, we must “draw near” to listen—not to offer the sacrifice of evil fools. What does this mean?

- First and foremost, this means that we are coming to listen to God’s written word and obey it. He is warning against hypocrisy: performing religious duties with a heart that harbors evil. Many verses warn against this:
 - 1 Sam. 15:22: “Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams.”
 - Prov. 15:8: “The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD, but the prayer of the upright is acceptable to him.”
 - Prov. 21:3: “To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the LORD than sacrifice.”
 - Hos. 6:6: “For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.”
 - Amos 5:21–22: “I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them.”
 - Mic. 6:6–8: “With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? ... He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

- Gibson: "The Preacher is re-preaching what Moses preached in Deuteronomy: 'Hear, O Israel.'"
 - Second, this means that we are coming to listen to God's living voice. For the Preacher's audience, this included hearing God's word through prophets and teachers. For us as New Covenant believers, the principle expands even further, since the Spirit has been poured out on all flesh and every believer can hear God's voice (Acts 2:17). Whether through the faithful exposition of Scripture, the gift of prophecy, or a Spirit-given revelation to any believer, we must draw near with hearts ready to revere and receive whatever God says, in whatever way He chooses to speak.
 - John 10:27: "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me."
 - Acts 13:2: "While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.'"
 - 1 Cor. 14:3: "The one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation."
 - Gibson: "The ear is the Christian's primary sense organ."
- "the sacrifice of fools":
- Contextually, the "sacrifice of fools" is one hypocritically offered. This is why the Preacher says, "they are doing evil."
 - Sacrifice without sincerity is sin in disguise. A holy act with a hollow heart becomes an unholy act. It profanes both worship and the worshiper.
- Gibson: "When verse 1 says that such fools 'do not know that they are doing evil,' it's referring to the kind of people who have become so used to playing games with God that they no longer expect religion to be anything else."

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. 3 For a dream comes with much business, and a fool's voice with many words.

—"Be not rash with your mouth" parallels "Guard your steps when you go...". The way we guard our steps is by guarding our lips. Furthermore, in guarding our speech, we guard our hearts, for out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks. The Preachers aim is to ensure we approach God with reverent hearts, expressed in careful speech.

—This section continues dwelling on the "sacrifice of fools" by zeroing in on the "fool's voice with many words."

—In contrast, the wise person speaks slowly out of respect for God, whose throne "is in heaven". We dwell "on earth", which is to say, far beneath God. Just as we wouldn't speak casually when approaching a powerful earthly monarch on his throne, we must guard our speech before God's infinitely higher throne.

—How does this limited speech before God align with Paul's exhortation to "Pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17), and "at all times" (Eph. 6:18), being "constant in prayer" (Rom. 12:12). How can we both "let our words be few"—and many?!

- Context must guide the interpretation of, "let your words be few" (Eccl. 5:2). The many-worded fool has already been labeled an evil hypocrite (5:1). We are reminded of Christ's warning in Matt. 6:7: "And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words." The same Lord who exhorted us to "always pray and never give up" (Luk. 18:1) also warned against praying too many words.
- Like Solomon, Christ admonished us against the kind of prayer that multiplies words as if to manipulate God. Rather than fearing God as the King of Heaven, people who pray this way bring God down to their level, as if they can strongarm Him into action through long prayers. One thinks of the prophets of Baal who prayed all day long for their false god to light a fire, in contrast to Elijah, whose single prayer turned a watery sacrifice into a blaze.
- The subsequent context (Eccl. 5:4-7) also informs us. The fools many words express themselves as vows aimed at manipulating God.
- In sum: Obedience requires us to "pray without ceasing," but not as a form of manipulation. God cannot be forced to act, especially to answer hypocrites.
- Manipulative prayer is folly; persistent prayer is faith. God wants a friendship with us, and friends relate—they don't manipulate.

- Kaiser: “we are rebuked for all pretense, hypocrisy, and superficial religiosity by which we hope to be heard merely for our verbosity or ‘much speaking’ (cf. Matt. 6:7). Limits are imposed only on the petitioner’s pretense, and not on the length of his prayers.”
- “For a dream comes with much business, and a fool’s voice with many words”:
- “For”: Solomon is explaining why God-fearers do not multiply vain words of religious noise.
 - “a dream”: Solomon will return to the subject of dreams in verse 7, tying the whole section together.
 - “much business... many words”:
 - When your life is filled with activity, you relive those stories in your dream life.
 - What does Solomon intend by comparing the restless activity of dreamers with the countless words of religious fools?
 - Consider the theme of the prior four chapters: ceaseless toil, which is striving after the wind.
 - Solomon is echoing this theme while adding a religious layer.
 - Just as the workaholic toils night and day for wealth, ambition, and a legacy nobody remembers—the religious hypocrite toils night and day to produce a show that God frowns on.
 - Just as the workaholic exhausts himself in striving after the wind, the hypocrite exhausts himself in verbal striving before God. Both are vanity.
 - One piles up deeds to secure a name on earth; the other piles up words to secure favor in heaven. Both schemes collapse under God’s judgment.
 - Provan (qtd. by Gibson), commenting on similarities between the workaholic of ch. 4 and the fool of ch. 5: “Overproduction is the root problem in both cases. A heart attentive to God multiplies neither toil nor words.”
 - In other words, meaningless activity in the world and meaningless verbosity in worship are two sides of the same coin. Ceaseless toil at work and ceaseless chatter in prayer are equally empty when divorced from reverence and obedience.

4 When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow. 5 It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. 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?

- “When you vow... do not delay paying it... he has no pleasure in fools”:
- The mention of a “vow” and “fools” reminds us of what Solomon already said about “fools” (vv. 1, 3) and their speech (v. 3). Therefore, we should read this as a unified discourse where each part enlightens the meaning of the other.
 - The “sacrifice of fools” (v. 1) refers to their “many words” in making careless vows before God—which they have no intention of fulfilling—and which only serve for religious show and an attempt to manipulate God’s favor.
 - In short, foolish worship multiplies words without obedience, vows without payment, prayers without reverence. And God takes no pleasure in such worship, for it is rooted not in the fear of God but in the presumption of man.
 - God accommodated vows in the Old Testament:
 - Num. 30:2: “If a man vows a vow to the LORD, or swears an oath to bind himself by a pledge, he shall not break his word. He shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth.”
 - Deut. 23:21: “If you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not delay fulfilling it, for the LORD your God will surely require it of you, and you will be guilty of sin.”
 - 1 Sam. 1:11: “And she vowed a vow and said, ‘O LORD of hosts, if you will indeed look on the affliction of your servant and remember me and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a son, then I will give him to the LORD all the days of his life, and no razor shall touch his head.’”

- Ps. 76:11: “Make your vows to the LORD your God and perform them; let all around him bring gifts to him who is to be feared.”
 - But in the NT, Jesus warns against vows: “Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.’ But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil” (Matt. 5:33-37).
 - At first glance, it appears that Jesus contradicts the Law. But in context, the Sermon on the Mount clarifies common distortions. The Pharisees violated Ecclesiastes 5:1-7 through hypocritical, manipulative vows, so Jesus shows how vows were never intended to be used this way. Then He offers a higher way—which is to not vow at all, but rather to let your “yes” and “no” stick.
 - Scholar RT France comments that “vows” and “oaths” are not precisely the same. A vow promises human action, while an oath undergirds one’s claim of truth with (supposed) divine backing. Since the focus of Ecclesiastes 5 is on vows, not oaths, I will quote what France says about vows: “With regard to vows, which were voluntary, Jesus is not so much opposing OT legislation as telling his disciples not to take an option which the law offered but did not require. His words recall the comment of Deut. 23:22 that, while vows once undertaken must be fulfilled (vv. 21, 23), if you do not make a vow at all ‘there is no sin in you.’”
 - In other words, the OT law makes provisions and accommodations for human weakness (such as the certificate of divorce, to use another example), but Jesus consistently appeals to God’s higher standard. France adds that “these provisions should never have been needed if people practiced the uncomplicated truthfulness which is what God desires.”
 - Notice also that Christ’s words about how it’s better NOT to vow AGREE with the OT teaching here: “It is better that you not vow...” As soon as we make a vow, we put ourselves on the hook. And who wants to be “on the hook” with extra expectations from the King of Heaven? Again, Christ is not contradicting, but clarifying, God’s Word.
 - The higher standard of righteousness to which Christ calls us should preclude us from making vows and oaths altogether. These are concessions for human frailty, not loopholes for us to exploit. In God’s kingdom, simple truthfulness in word and reverent obedience in deed render vows unnecessary.
- “Let not your mouth lead you into sin, and do not say before the messenger that it was a mistake”:
- This continues the theme of speech before God (and man). One who fears God will guard his steps and lips rather than layering on further obligations that we might fail to uphold.
 - “messenger” is translated as “God” in the Greek Septuagint—probably a reference to the Angel (Messenger) of the LORD, who is the preincarnate Lord Jesus. It is debatable whether the author intended this as God’s celestial messenger—the Angel—or a merely human priest or temple representative.
- “Why should God be angry...”: To carelessly utter a vow you don’t keep only stirs the anger of God, whom we should have feared enough to speak carefully.
- The classic OT example of a foolish vow is Jephthah. He vowed that if God gave him victory in battle, he would sacrifice whatever came out of his house to greet him. Tragically, upon his return, his only daughter rushed out to celebrate. Jephthah kept his vow and sacrificed her. The story is a sobering warning against rash vows. But was this Jephthah’s only option—to kill his daughter? No. God’s law clearly forbade child sacrifice. He should have chosen the lesser wrong by breaking his vow and letting her live. Better still, he should never have vowed at all.
- This is the danger of vows: they presume on a future we cannot control. As soon as you vow money to God, you may lose your income. As soon as you vow regular service, you may fall ill. Jephthah’s tragedy illustrates the Preacher’s wisdom: “It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay” (Eccl. 5:5). Vows bind us to a future beyond our power—which invites folly, guilt, and grief.

7 For when dreams increase and words grow many, there is vanity; but God is the one you must fear.

—Solomon returns to the theme of “dreams” and “words”, which he introduced in 5:3. As we saw there, both concepts relate to ceaseless toil and striving. As we saw there, both are symptoms of restless striving. Just as the overworked laborer’s anxieties spill into his dreams at night, so the religious fool’s striving pours out in endless words and rash vows. Both dream-filled nights and word-filled prayers are byproducts of a life consumed with ceaseless toil.

—By returning to these images, Solomon layers a spiritual dimension onto the theme of the previous chapters. Earlier he exposed the vanity of tireless work for wealth, reputation, or legacy (1:12–2:26; 4:4–8). Now he unmasks a parallel vanity in worship: a person can be just as restless, anxious, and manipulative before God as they are in the marketplace. Workaholism and wordiness spring from the same root—a refusal to rest in God’s sovereignty.

—The Preacher’s warning is clear: the kingdom of God is not advanced by restless activity or religious verbosity. Both are vapor. Reverence, not striving, is what God requires: “But God is the one you must fear” (5:7b).

—The fear of God in Ecclesiastes:

- Eccl. 3:14 – “God has done it, so that people **fear** before him.”
- Eccl. 5:7 – “But God is the one you must **fear**.”
- Eccl. 7:18 – “The one who **fears God** shall come out from both of them.”
- Eccl. 8:12–13 – “...it will be well with those who **fear God**, because they fear before him. But it will not be well with the wicked...”
- Eccl. 12:13 – “The end of the matter; all has been heard. **Fear God** and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.”

—The function of fearing God in Ecclesiastes:

- **Counterweight to vanity.** If “vanity” (Heb: *hebel*) is the diagnosis of life under the sun, “fear of God” is the antidote. It doesn’t erase life’s enigmas but orients us rightly within them.
- **Theological anchor.** While pleasures, toil, and wisdom all prove fleeting, fear of God is commended as the one enduring foundation for life.
- **Culmination.** The final call in 12:13 shows how the fear of God isn’t just one theme among others—it is the capstone, the Preacher’s distilled counsel after surveying everything else.

—In Ecclesiastes, the fear of God is not slavish terror but reverent submission—acknowledging our limits, watching our words, living humbly, and trusting God’s sovereign plan. Everything else is a vapor; the fear of God is what gives life weight.