

Listening Before God

Ecclesiastes 5:1-7

MJCF October 1, 2023

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Words are important, and although we often make mistakes, we need to do our best to take care in how we use our words. In chapter 5 of Ecclesiastes, the author begins by encouraging us to be cautious in how we use our words, such as in our relationship with God, in times of worship or prayer. It is better to be silent than to fill the time with many useless words.

Today's passage is a little confusing, talking about words, dreams, and fools. But, a key point here, is that it's important to think about our attitude when we approach God. How do we worship? How do we pray? Do we spend the whole time just telling God what we want, filling the space with our own thoughts and words, or do we also give time to listen for God's voice in our hearts?

"Never be rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be quick to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven, and you are upon earth; therefore let your words be few." Verse two of Ecclesiastes chapter 5 is based on our relationship with God. When we come before God to worship or to pray, our attitude is important. "God is in heaven" and we are "on earth", in other words, God, the creator of the world, is far beyond us while we are limited. Earlier, in chapter three that was also a major theme in relation to time. There is a time for everything. Humans have a limited understanding, while God is far beyond even the limits of time. The gap between our limitations and God's unlimited power should lead us to reverence before God. As we come before God in prayer or worship, an attitude of humility is appropriate. Instead of just laying out all our wishes before God, a humble attitude will mean that we also take time to listen for a sense of where God may be leading us. Verse one of our passage says, "Guard your steps when you go to the house of God; to draw near to listen is better than the sacrifice offered by fools." When we come into God's presence, one challenge is learning to listen. Do you know someone who talks too much? For me, after a while, it's easy to stop paying attention to what they say. Now, what about a person who doesn't say much but listens well? Then, I start to want to spend more time with that person, and I pay close attention to what they say. I wonder if God feels a little like that when we pray. I guess the difference is that God's love for us is way deeper than we can imagine. God pays attention to each of us completely, knows us inside-out. Although one aspect of prayer is that we can honestly pour out all our true feelings to God, as we grow in prayer, we learn to also listen in silence, recognize God's will, confess our own evil, trust, and follow.

In this section of Ecclesiastes the Evangelist introduces the character of the fool to represent what to avoid. The fool comes to God with many words, rather than listening. In biblical times, animal sacrifices were used as a part of worship. People would offer an animal, a portion of their most valuable resource, as a burnt offering. A fool may come to worship with a sacrifice to cover up unfaithful living. It's like the murderer who goes to confession only in order to ease his conscience rather than to actually change his ways. In 1st Samuel 15 (c.22) it says "It is better to obey the LORD than to offer sacrifices to him. It is better to listen to him than to offer the fat from rams."

In today's passage, we read, "...dreams come with many cares, and a fool's voice with many words." Here, the word dream likely has a meaning something similar to the word "vapor" that the Evangelist has repeated throughout Ecclesiastes. In this context, dreams represent things that are insubstantial, fleeting, or worthless. The many words and dreams of the fool become insubstantial. But, those who fear God will spend more time listening, and keep their words few. By taking more time to listen, we receive wisdom from God. Do we truly listen?

I don't see myself as a very talkative person. And, I sometimes have trouble communicating, either because I keep silent when I should be saying something, or because when I do say something I don't always think well about how others may receive what I say. This is the kind of thing you start to see after getting married. Suddenly you have someone who can give honest feedback as to how your words or lack of words are received by others. Most people have a lot to learn in order to truly listen rather than

just speak. There's the story of a husband who,

... read an article to his wife about how women use 30,000 words a day to a man's 15,000. The wife replied, "That's because we have to repeat everything to men." The husband turned to his wife and said, "What?"

I can identify with that. Somehow, my listening isn't always the best. I know I'm good at keeping quiet, but during that time, I can't say I'm always listening well.

Verse 4 of our Ecclesiastes passage presents another aspect of how we use our words. We are to take care if we make a vow to God. We shouldn't delay in fulfilling it, because the longer we wait, the more likely we may forget it. The fool easily forgets because the fool doesn't take God seriously. In our culture, we don't often make vows. Two places I can think of, though, are during a wedding, or during baptism. At those times we make vows to be true to our spouse, or to be true to following Jesus Christ, two of the greatest decisions anyone can make in life. According to the author of Ecclesiastes, "It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not fulfill it. Do not let your mouth lead you into sin...." The sin would be to not take God seriously, speaking and making a vow without thinking.

This section ends with the sense that with (worthless) dreams, come emptiness, and a multitude of words. Instead of that, we are to fear God. Habakkuk 2:20 says "the LORD is in His holy temple; let all the earth be silent before Him." God is not just our "chum". Although God is close to us through the Spirit. God is also far beyond us, in heaven. Having the fear of God, means having a deep respect. God the creator of the universe is reigning supreme "in heaven" while we "on earth" are limited, and frail. Yet, God desires an intimate connection with us. In order to make this possible, God sent Jesus to bridge that great gap. Seeing how God blessed Jesus by raising him to life after death on a cross, we now see the blessings of God's love for us. The infinite God has bridged the gap. What an awesome thing! Jesus is now Lord of all. If we truly believe this to be true, it will produce a deep reverence for God, and we'll be moved to humbly listen for God's word to us.

Some of us may remember the story of Jesus taking Peter, James, and John up a mountain. It's found in Mark 9:2-8. At the top of the mountain, they experience a miracle. Jesus's clothes become dazzling white, and Elijah and Moses (who had long been dead) appear, talking with Jesus. Later, a cloud overshadows them and God's voice is heard, "This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him!"

Are we listening? Or, are we filling our prayers and worship with our own words and thoughts? May we learn to humbly and truly listen for God's voice in our hearts. Let's pray.

O Lord, we confess that we have not always listened for your voice. It's so easy to fill our prayers with words rather than silently wait to hear your word to us. Speak to our hearts, we pray. As we take a minute to be silent, fill us with your Spirit, we pray...Amen.