

# When Worship is Vanity

Ecclesiastes 5:1-3

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## **Introduction:**

In Ecclesiastes, Solomon has been instructing us about the utter vanity of life in this world under the sun—without God.

- He has taken things that we tend to think would really make life worthwhile...
  - Riches—lots and lots of them!
  - Pleasures—lots and lots of them!
  - Education—lots and lots of that!
  - Successful projects—lots and lots of these!
  - Relationships—lots and lots of these...even his 1000 virgins...
  - And he has shown us that even if we have all of these to the highest degree, it is all worthless...
    - We are going to die, so what is the point?

But Solomon has also shown us a much better way.

- He has shown us that meaning and purpose can be found in this world in the Lord of glory if we are reconciled to Him.
  - Joy and wisdom and understanding are His gifts.
  - He gives these to those who are reconciled to Him through Jesus.
- Solomon has been showing us that joyful purposeful life in the Lord cannot be taken away even by the awful things that are in the world...
  - Even though we are subject to the changes of seasons—a time to be born, but also a time to die! a time of gain and a time to lose! a time of peace, but also a time of war!
    - Nothing is stable, nothing is lasting here—except God's eternal purpose which He is working out through all these changes to at last make all things beautiful in their time.
      - So we can go on and serve Him with joy and purpose and hope, despite all these changes.
  - And Solomon has also shown us that all the injustice in the world cannot take away our joy and purpose in the Lord.
    - Yes, the world is a terrible place of oppression and hatred and justice cannot even be found in the very halls of justice, but God even has a purpose for all this wickedness—
      - He leaves us to such behaviour and brings death upon us so that we can see that by our departing from Him (by the fall) we have become like beasts...

- But He assures us that there is a day of judgement coming; therefore, we can go on serving Him with joy as long as we are here, knowing that justice will be done.
  - We can do this if we are truly in Christ—forgiven and transformed by His saving grace and mercy.
- And last week in chapter 4, we saw that God has a much better way for us to live than the way of injustice and indifference toward our neighbour—
  - We are to live as if other people matter...
    - Not oppressing them and neglecting them and living as if they are not quite as real as we are...
      - but caring and giving—living to bless them and enrich them—living in joyful community.
    - Jesus, of course, is the one who brings us into this fellowship of love.
      - He is the ultimate example—
        - the one who truly fulfills the law of love—
        - and we find true joy, purpose, and meaning in Him as we, by His grace, lay down our lives for each other!

So it is clear—true purpose and joy is found in the Lord.

- The vanity of this world is caused by our detachment from Him and eternal life is restored by our reconciliation with Him.

But now as we come to chapter 5,

- Solomon describes vanity in an activity where we might not expect to find it!!!
  - In our very worship of God!
  - That's right—even our worship can be detached from God and can be labeled as utter vanity!
- Actually, I guess this may not come to many as a surprise...
  - I think most people are actually quite familiar with worship that is vanity...
    - Even of the people outside the church can often discern this...
  - I talk to some people who tell me that vanity is all they ever found in worship and that is why they stopped...
    - And I sometimes surprise them by saying that that was all I found in it too, growing up in the church.
    - I grew up in a liberal church that did not preach the gospel—and it was really all just vanity.
    - How could I worship God when I was not reconciled to Him?
      - I could not.
- But that is not all...
  - The truth is that even after I came to Christ—I must confess that still my worship is often vain—
    - There are times when I worship without true regard for the Lord.

- Last week, we looked at living as if other people don't matter and are not quite as real as we are...
  - Well this week you could say that we are looking at empty worship that is carried out as if God Himself is not real and does not matter...
    - Talk about vanity!
    - You get together to worship God and you just go through the motions and it is not even really for the Lord—it is just a big sham!
      - It is worship that forgets God!
      - A dreadful thing!
      - A vain thing! But we all do it!

Take a look at what Solomon says about this in Ecclesiastes 5:1-7:

**Ecc 5:1-7: Walk prudently when you go to the house of God; and draw near to hear, rather than to give the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they do evil. <sup>2</sup> Do not be rash with your mouth, and let not your heart utter anything hastily before God. For God *is* in heaven, and you on earth; therefore let your words be few. <sup>3</sup> For a dream comes through much activity, and a fool's voice *is known* by his many words.**

**<sup>4</sup> When you make a vow to God, do not delay to pay it; for *He has* no pleasure in fools. Pay what you have vowed— <sup>5</sup> better not to vow than to vow and not pay. <sup>6</sup> Do not let your mouth cause your flesh to sin, nor say before the messenger *of God* that it *was* an error. Why should God be angry at your excuse and destroy the work of your hands? <sup>7</sup> For in the multitude of dreams and many words *there is* also vanity. But fear God.**

May the Lord bless to us the reading of His holy Word.

This is a very challenging passage!

- It exposes each one of us as deficient worshippers who forget God even while we are worshipping Him...
  - Who among us can say that we have never done this?
  - Who can say that you have not (in fact) done this quite a lot?
- Charles Bridges says, “What a mass of vacant service—of traditionary form—the copy and dead imitation of real worship—no throbbing and spiritual life!”
  - And what a wicked and vain thing it is!
    - Just think of it!
      - Coming to worship and forgetting the glorious one you are supposed to be worshipping!
    - It is a violation of the third commandment to the max—
      - **You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain!**
    - *In vain* indeed!
      - What greater vanity than this!
      - What is the purpose of such worship—it is utterly worthless!

- But praise God that there is forgiveness with Him.
  - If it were not so, we would be completely undone—there would be no hope for us.
  - But there is forgiveness so that we can continue serving God—and so that we can continue looking to Him to help us in our worship...
    - Yes my brothers and sisters—if you are in Christ, you can face this passage, knowing that it is written to help you...
      - to help you and not to condemn you—unless you are so blind and proud that you think you need no forgiveness...
      - If that is your attitude, then you need this text to show you how unfit you are—unfit, condemned before God.
        - You need to see this that you might repent and turn to Jesus.
    - But for you who belong to Jesus—you who intend to come to worship well, but who find that you slip into the folly that this passage speaks about...
      - this passage is given to you to help you to see the problem more fully and to see what you can do to change and to encourage you to look to the Lord for grace and mercy with thanksgiving.

TRANS> So look at what it says with hope...first...

## **I. Watch your step when you come to God's house**

- You worship in vain when you don't watch your step

### **A. *Coming to the house of the LORD* speaks of coming to public worship**

1. In the Old Testament, *the house of God* was the temple in Jerusalem where the congregation of Israel gathered for worship...
  - They went up on the pilgrimages three times a year, and they also had their holy convocation each Sabbath day in their dwellings where they gathered with an eye on the temple and its sacrifices.
  - They saw that they were coming before the Holy God who had mercifully called them to have communion with them.
    - The veil represented the separation that their sin had made...
    - The altar with the sacrifices represented the atonement that was needed to cover their sins that they might be pardoned...
    - They came to the house of God on His terms, properly rejoicing to be counted among His people.
2. For us in the New Testament, *coming to the house of God* is also coming to the assembly,
  - but not to Jerusalem or to a temple made with men's hands...
  - but before the throne of grace in heaven where our high priest is, seated at God's right hand, making intercession for us.
    - We come before God in Jesus' name in the local congregation, gathered together before God in every place.

- We have a better sacrifice than the blood of the Old Covenant because we have Jesus Christ who was crucified for us.
    - We can draw near with a heart of true assurance because we have been cleansed by His blood...
    - And that is just what we do each Lord's Day when we assemble in our holy convocation—we come to God's house.
3. Let me say that it is important to recognize the distinction between coming to the house of God—to the assembly He has appointed—and the rest of life.
- Some have championed the idea that “all of life is worship.”
    - In a way it is—all that we do is to be done as service to our Master, with an eye to pleasing Him—with thanksgiving to Him...
  - But we need to recognize that He also calls us out as a church—as an assembly—to worship Him—
    - to come before Him with specially focused worship to praise Him, to pray, to hear His word, to celebrate the sacraments—
      - Even before the fall, God appointed the Sabbath when Adam was to set apart his ordinary labour to worship.
    - Paul speaks of it as “when you come together.”
      - The Lord has appointed our weekly gathering, not just to meet with each other, but to meet with Him....

TRANS> And when you come—when you come to God's house—

B. Solomon tells you to *watch your step*—

- to *walk prudently* as it says in our translation...
    - but it is more literally to keep your foot...or our idiom, to watch your step!
1. We are coming before a holy God!
- We are coming before the one before whom, if His glory were unmasked to us, would put terror in us!
    - He is of purer eyes than to behold evil!
    - He is a consuming fire who devours that which is not holy when it is brought before Him...
    - That is who He is—terrible in His beauty and majesty!!
  - He is the One whose glory caused holy men like Moses and Job and Isaiah and Daniel and the aged apostle John to tremble or to become as dead men.
    - His glory revealed at Sinai left the worshippers begging that He would not appear to them in that way again lest they die.
    - This is the God before whom we come!

2. There is no place for coming vacantly, irreverently, distractedly, pompously—in cavalier or careless manner.
  - a. It is entirely inappropriate to come before our holy God with unfocused attention as if He does not notice us—
    - We ought to be entirely riveted.
  - b. We need to see what an incredible privilege it is to be called before Him.
    - We are so slack—so prone to forget—that we are before His majestic throne of glory.
      - The only reason we can come and not be consumed before His majesty is because of the blood of Christ that cleanses us.
    - Do not come without the recognition of what a great privilege it is!
      - It is truly a place that we do not belong—we are not worthy to be here—but for Christ our priest who intercedes for us.
  - c. There is no place for pride, for putting on a show of piety, nor for looseness and levity—
    - This is the house of the living God!
    - Yes, He is our Father, but He is also our awesome God.

TRANS> And so you must watch your step!

C. You need to prepare yourself to come.

- And how do you do that?
1. Simply by considering what it is that you are doing—
    - Take some time to meditate and consider what it is that you are getting ready to do when you come to the house of the Lord.
      - In a sense, you ought to be preparing for it all week long—
        - Say to your soul,
          - “Soul, I am going to come before the face of God—to meet with Him—to hear His voice—to praise His name—to make supplication to Him!”
    - Work up an appetite to hear His voice—consider who He is and come with your praise and thanksgiving to Him...
      - Consider how holy He is, how majestic and great, how benevolent and kind, yet out dreadful in His judgements.
        - If you were called before some dignitary in this world, you would not take that lightly—
      - Consider the cost of your admission and what Christ had to pay that you might come!
        - If someone bought you tickets to an event that costs ten thousand dollars, you would think that special...Christ gave His life that you might come to God.
      - Consider the purity that is required for you to come!
        - You had to be cleansed by His precious blood before you could come before Him.

TRANS> Watch your step—you are coming on holy ground.

2. And most importantly, prepare by joining yourself up to the two intercessors that God has provided for you...
  - Our coming before God is such a tremendous thing that it requires two intercessors of the highest dignity and ability...
    - The Holy Spirit who works within us,
      - to enable us to pray, giving us true groanings and yearnings;
      - and to enable us to receive the Word with reverence and conviction and comfort and hope;
      - and to enable us to lift up appropriate heart-felt praise to God...
    - And the Son of God, Jesus Christ who intercedes for us in heaven—
      - showing His wounds for our pardon as our great high priest and displaying His righteousness for our acceptance.
  - What a grand thing it is that God has made such provision for us, all that we may come before Him—we who otherwise could not come!
    - Be sure that you join yourself to these two intercessors when you come to the house of God...
      - That is the best way to prepare...
        - Consider how much you need them and pray earnestly that they would intercede for you when you come to the house of the Lord!
    - You see in all this that the grandness is not in the building or in the music or in some processional...
      - the grandness is in the One that you worship and in the Ones that intercede for you that you might worship.
        - Watch your step when you come before Him!

TRANS> Now Solomon moves on and gives us some particular things we need to do lest our worship be in vain...

- First, he tells you to...

## II. Come to listen

- You worship in vain when you come to talk instead of to listen...
  - Verse 1 says, **“Draw near to hear rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools.”**
- A. This has to do with your whole attitude about how you approach God...your whole demeanour...
  1. There are two ways to approach Him...
    - You either come to Him on your terms or on His terms.
      - You are a fool if you come on your terms.
      - You will be saved if you come on His terms.
    - His terms are what I have already spoken about...
      - You can only come to Him by faith in Jesus Christ.

- We are all cut off from God by our sin and God is holy, but Jesus made atonement and He gives us His Spirit...
    - And we draw near, as Hebrews 10 says, by his blood.
    - There is no other way into the holiest but by the blood of Jesus.
2. The question is—
- Have you listened to God even about this?
    - You are a fool if you come barging in to worship Him without Christ.
    - That is the epitome of vain worship.
  - You can come with the best intentions and with the greatest of sacrifices and services...
    - You can come with a list of your good deeds and with your honesty and your integrity and your large offerings...
    - But it is the sacrifice of fools...
      - It is all vain because it is not what God appointed.
      - Like Cain, God will not regard you or your sacrifice.
        - You refuse to listen to what God requires!
        - He requires that you come trusting in Jesus.
    - Isn't it foolish to approach such a holy God—the God who made heaven and earth—without regard for what He has said?
      - It is the height of vanity—but thousands do it!
3. Solomon says that they do not even realize that their sacrifices are evil.
- Jesus talked about those who honestly thought the things they were doing were pleasing to God.
  - There is this deep, deep blindness...
    - They are making God angry and think they are pleasing Him...
  - Do you think the many people who have offered up their children to God did it because they thought it would anger God?
    - Do you even think they offered animals before their idols—images of God that they had made supposing that He would be angry with them?
    - You can be sure that they would never have given up their livestock in which they had their living if they thought that!
  - Vain worshippers think they are pleasing to God.
    - Many people today go to great effort to worship—but they do not hear the call to be reconciled through Jesus.
      - They suppose that they will be received because of their good intentions.

TRANS> Hearing the gospel—obeying the gospel—is foundational to basic worship!

- If you do not hear and obey the gospel, you can never please God.



- B. But listening does not end with coming to Jesus for salvation.
1. You are to keep on listening to God.
    - In fact, coming to Jesus puts you in the right posture as a listener before God.
    - a. When you come as a listener, you come to His house asking what He wants you to do when you get there.
      - You come to follow what He has appointed in Christian worship in His word, not to do what you think is best...
        - Not to add to what He has commanded or to take away from it...
        - He tells you to come:
          - to hear the Word read and preached,
          - to engage in the corporate prayers,
          - to lift up your voice in praise,
          - and to celebrate the sacraments in the way He appointed...
      - You do not set the agenda, He does!
        - It is not what pleases you, but what pleases Him—what He has appointed that matters!
    - b. You turn things around backward when you come with your agenda for God...
      - with a list of things that you want to offer to Him in your worship...
      - It has become very common in our day for people to draw near to express themselves...
        - They come with a song they have found that expresses their sentiments—
          - with a skit to perform—
          - with an audio visual presentation—
          - with a reading or an interpretive dance—
          - with a dramatic presentation—
        - and of course there have long been those with high church traditions—
          - they come with special vestments and a great processional...
          - with incense and bells and genuflections...
      - Sometimes folks go to great expense and great effort to bring these sacrifices before God...
        - They are sincere...they do it in hopes of pleasing God.
        - But God's Word here says that they are fools...
          - They are fools because they are doing all of these things, but they have not listened to God to see if this is what God wants them to do in His house...
          - He is God!
          - He is the One who is being worshipped!
          - He is the One who calls the shots!

- We need to ask what He wants us to sing,
  - what He wants us to read,
  - if He wants the musical instruments and incense and altars and priestly clothing in New Testament worship that were part of the old.
- It is disturbing how many folks just don't even want to find out what pleases Him.
- And look, at the end of verse 1, it is not only folly...
  - the Word says that they do evil—they do evil and they don't even realize it!

TRANS> The Lord wants you to come with the posture of a listener...

2. And one of the activities that God has called you to do in worship is this very matter of listening—

- A major part of our worship involves hearing His Word...
  - and we must not neglect this or minimize it.
- a. He has appointed that His Word be read and preached!
  - He sends forth preachers to expound the Word in His name.
  - He has promised to work by His Spirit in you (if you are His) to enable you to receive the Word from Him with understanding.
- b. If God Almighty summons you to His house and wishes to speak to you, you had better come with both ears opened!
  - Just think, He deigns to speak to you!
    - to give you counsel!
    - to tell you and remind you what He had done for you!
    - to set before you His promise of glory!
    - to encourage you with His promise of help!
    - to correct what is wrong in you and set you on the path that pleases Him!
  - He Himself deigns to speak to you in the assembly!
    - That should make you very intent on listening!
      - It is very disrespectful to come without giving Him your fullest attention.
- c. So is this your posture?
  - Jesus says that His sheep hear His voice and follow Him!
    - Are you one of His sheep?
  - Do you come to hear what God wants?
  - Do you come to listen and to find out what is pleasing to Him?
  - Do you come with a readiness to depart from sin that is exposed in you when you worship?
  - Do you come to be comforted by His promises and to embrace them?

TRANS> So we have seen so far that Solomon says that we are to watch our step—and that we are to come to hear—as listeners...

- In verse 2 he has yet more counsel...

### III. He tells you to avoid rash words when you come before Him

- Speaking is something we are to do...
  - But you worship in vain when your words are rash.

#### A. Rash words are words that you don't mean...

- They are words that are spoken hastily before God—without thinking about what you are saying.
  - **Ecc 5:2: Do not be rash with your mouth, and let not your heart utter anything hastily before God.**

#### 1. This is very easy to do when praying or singing...

- You have all done this—I know I have!
- You are standing before God Almighty,
  - singing Psalms before Him and thinking about your lawn mower or something while the words are coming out of your mouth...
    - or about your clothes or the work you are doing on your house...
- And someone is praying and you are off in your own world—a dream world...
  - This is very disrespectful to God Almighty!
  - We all deserve to go to Hell for this—really!

#### 2. You can even do this when you are the one leading in prayer—

- even when you are praying at home...
  - You are not even thinking about the One you are praying to!
  - You are just saying stuff—uttering words—just babbling.

#### 3. Solomon compares such empty words to a dream...

- There are words coming out of you but they are all superficial and worthless...
  - There is much business in a dream—much going on—a flurry of activity,
    - but when you wake up, you see that it was all disjointed and superficial—none of it was real.
- Solomon says that just as in a dream you have all this activity—so with a fool you have all these words...words words words!
  - It is a characteristic of a fool that empty words that don't mean a thing just flow out of him all the time.
    - I have had fools just tell me things that are not at all true—just made up because they want to impress me or something...
    - But just think of doing this before God who knows everything!
      - How is that we are more likely to behave this way toward Him even than we are toward each other?
      - It shows how superficial our relationship with God is.

- B. The key to solving this problem is simply to consider who God is!
- Solomon says,
    - **v. 2: let not your heart utter anything hastily before God. For God is in heaven, and you on earth; therefore let your words be few.**
  - 1. God is in heaven and you on earth—
    - This is what we call the creature/Creator distinction!
      - God is totally in a class by Himself—high, high above us.
      - He is the one who called all things into existence!
  - 2. Consider that you are speaking to Him in your worship!
    - Consider His majesty—be mindful of His holiness and His deity!
      - He is worthy of all praise and honour...
      - When David feigned madness before Achish, King of the Gath,
        - The king said, “Why have you brought him to me? Have I need of madmen that you have brought this fellow play the madman before me?”
        - Has God need of babblers who speak mindless words before Him?
      - Are mindless words appropriate when you have the privilege of speaking to God Almighty?
        - Would you think of speaking mindlessly if you were standing before some great noble or king?
        - Why do this before God who is heaven and who sees into your very heart?
          - He is holy and He calls your babble the words of a fool!
    - The point is simple—just remember who He is before whom you come!
  - 3. When you do, your words will be few...
    - Not that prayers have to be short—Jesus often prayed all night...
      - But they must be real—they must be heart-felt—
      - God is not impressed with a volume of words...
    - Job had been saying a lot about his trials before God—
      - but when He saw God’s majesty and heard God’s word, he said,
        - **Job 40:4-5: “Behold, I am vile; what shall I answer You? I lay my hand over my mouth. Once I have spoken, but I will not answer; yes, twice, but I will proceed no further.”**
      - It is proper to pour out ardent prayers to God—but we must not begin to dictate to Him or reproach Him...
        - Once we grasp His majesty we will have less to say...
        - We will put our hand over our mouth.
        - We will be careful to measure our words.
- TRANS> Perhaps you are seeing a pattern now in what Solomon is talking about...
- You need to come before God knowing that He is God—that He is real and that He knows what you are doing before Him...
    - come, watching your step...
    - come, with a listening ear...

- come, watching your words...
- And now last of all...you must see that you...

#### **IV. Perform your vows to the Lord.**

- You worship in vain when you do not perform your vows before God.
- But there is a lot that I want to say about this—
  - and I do not want to be rushed,
  - so I am going to save this for next week.

#### **Conclusion**

But you can see the problem that Solomon is addressing here...

- It is worshipping God in vain—
  - You come before Him and you go through the motions, but you have no regard for Him—
    - It is as if God whom you are supposed to be worshipping is not even there!
    - It is as if He does not see or does not care that you are ignoring Him when you worship.
- This is a huge problem!
  - It is a problem with the most dreadful consequences if it is such that you have actually trifled with Jesus...
    - That you have gone through the motions of being His disciple—that you have professed to trust in Him...
    - But if in fact it was all just empty words...
      - Just superficial dreamy like words that have no substance...
      - You need to repent at once and come to Him for real—lay down your life for real—trust Him for real and be His disciple for real!
- And for those of you who do belong to Him...
  - This is all very convicting isn't it?
    - How can God forgive us for all of our vain worship?
    - It seems like most of it is vain!
    - It is a very shameful thing...
      - And we certainly don't deserve to be forgiven...
  - But Jesus' blood will not fail...
    - If you are trusting in Him, you have the forgiveness of sin...
      - In Jesus, you have a sacrifice that is able to take care of it all!
      - Even though your worship is not very real, His sacrifice is real!
    - And you also have His grace—real grace at work in you!
      - He is making you a better worshipper—
        - So come to Him with hope—ask Him to help you!
        - Ask Him to help you each week!
        - Pour out your heart to Him...

- Ask Him to forgive you and help you to be the worshipper that God has called you to be!
- He who began a good work in you will be faithful to complete it in you, and you will glorify Him!
  - Won't it be wonderful to grow in this area?
  - Oh to be purged of all this vanity and to be a real worshipper of God!