

The Bonfire of the Vanities “The Meaninglessness of Religion” **Ecclesiastes 5:1-7**

Introduction

- [Slide #1] A 2005 poll conducted by *Newsweek* and *Beliefnet* asked the following question, "Why do you practice religion?" How might you answer that question? Here's what others said...
 - 39 percent said they practiced religion to forge a personal relationship with God
 - 30 percent said religion helped them be a better person and live a moral life
 - 17 percent said to find peace and happiness
 - 10 percent said to connect with something larger than themselves
 - 8 percent said to give life meaning and structure
 - 3 percent said they practiced religion to be part of a community¹
- What would the Teacher, the writer of Ecclesiastes, say if we were to ask him this question? "Why do you practice religion?" I think he'd say something similar to what writer [Stephen King](#) said about a year ago in an interview with the magazine *Citizen*. King said, "I'm not a vampire type, when somebody shows me the cross...But organized religion gives me the creeps."²
- We've come to a point in our journey with the Teacher where many of the things we pursue have already been thrown on the fire. Wisdom and knowledge, pleasure, our work—what we do, laughter, creativity, entertainment and sex, all of them have been thrown on the Bonfire of the Vanities. They are all vain pursuits. To chase after those things is to chase after the wind. But, the surprise of all surprises, as we come now to chapter five, is that the next thing to make it onto the Teacher's bonfire is religion.

Transition

I think what the Teacher has to say to us here in Ecclesiastes 5:1-7 is this...[Slide #2]

Proposition

- **Religion drives God nuts and is meaningless to Him**
- [Stephen King](#) and God have something in common. Religion gives God the creeps.
- Maybe in this journey you've come to realize that what the Teacher says about life under the sun, life on this earth, is true. His evaluation and experience of things is correct. Life is unfair. Life is absurd. The net advantage of all we pursue is zero. We're spinning our wheels here. "Life is full of trouble and then you die."³ "*Meaningless! Meaningless!*" says the Teacher. "*Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.*" There is no meaning in life on this earth apart from the God of the Bible.

¹ Jerry Adler, "Special Report: Spirituality," *Newsweek* (9-5-05), p. 48.

² Stephen King, U. S. fiction writer, Source: *Citizen* (February 2008), p. 15.

³ Tremper Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, p. 34.

- If that's the case then the conclusion you've come to is good. Better yet. It's great. But don't be snookered. There is no meaning in life on this earth apart from the God of the Bible. Religion included. The purpose of this book, the purpose of this journey with the Teacher is not to drive you to religion or religiosity. The purpose of Ecclesiastes, the Teacher's goal, God's desire is to drive you to himself.
- Religion is not the answer. God is someone who is. Someone to be related to. Someone to love and serve. Religion is something we as humans do, something we've created to give us a sense of the divine. It's completely possible to pursue religion apart from God, with God no where in the mix. And many people do. We even make up our own religions. Did you know that according to the [British Office for National Statistics](#), when asked to identify their religion, over 390,000 people wrote in "Jedi" on the 2001 census form? In fact, more people in Britain identified themselves as Jedi than Jewish, Buddhist, or Sikh.⁴ We are really good at being religious.
- The Teacher says here in chapter five that pursuing religion apart from God, like all the other things he has mentioned so far, is utterly and absolutely meaningless. It too is a wisp of smoke, an unsubstantial vapor, a breath. God wants faith. Loving religion, devoting yourself to religion, is not the same thing as loving God, devoting yourself to God. He wants our hearts. He wants us. And he wants us to trust him. Not religiosity. Not superficial religious devotion.

Transition

I think here in Ecclesiastes 5:1-7, the Teacher, in his wisdom, gives us...

Organizational Sentence

- **Three religious practices people do that drive God nuts**
- The first is found in [verse 1](#), the second in [verses 2-3](#), and the third religious practice we do is found in [verses 4-7](#). In each of these three sections the Teacher is quick to point out that it is the fool who practices religion in this way. God could care less about the practices. They are meaningless to him. They are vanities to him.

Transition

Look at verse 1 and the [first religious practice](#) that drives God nuts. Ecclesiastes 5:1. *Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong.* [[Slide #3](#)] The first is **cavalier worship**.

Main Points

- All across the world, every Sunday morning and throughout each week people file into church buildings, cathedrals, storefronts, basements, living rooms, to worship God with about as much preparation as they put into tying their shoes earlier that morning. We show up. Go through the motions. Mouth the words. Pray the prayers. Do a little meet and greet. And we're done. This practice of **cavalier worship** is what the Teacher calls *the sacrifice of fools* and it is utterly meaningless to God. It is pure religiosity. And it is a waste of time, both yours and God's.

⁴ Jim Sandell, "Jedis Becomes a Force to be Counted," *Reuters* (2-13-03).

- As [Derek Kidner](#) puts it, “to be casual with God is an evil” which is exactly what the Teacher says at the end of [verse 1](#).⁵ He says those who offer the sacrifice of fools *do not know that they do wrong*. Literally the text reads *they do not know they do evil*. “They are so foolish that they are not even aware that their sacrifices are evil, an offense to God.”⁶
- Instead, the Teacher says the better thing to do is to *guard your steps when you go to the house of God*. Instead of cavalierly, casually coming into God’s presence to *offer the sacrifice of fools* he says guard your steps. Watch your steps. In other words, be prepared. How much preparation do you put into worship? Seriously? If you’re anything like me, not as much as you should. What does it mean to be prepared?
- Look at what the Teacher says. He says *Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools*. The prepared worshiper is someone who is ready to listen to what God has to say. In fact, I want to suggest to you that your primary responsibility as a worshiper is to be a listener. Above all else, above singing, praising, you name it, God’s wants listeners. Listening is better than offering *the sacrifice of fools*. You see, God is a God who speaks. He speaks through his Word, through the music, through the sermon, through prayer. And therefore, if we want to worship him, we must listen to what he has to say. And when we listen it implies that we hear what he’s said. And if we’re really serious about worshiping hearing God implies obedience. And from God’s perspective obedience is always better than sacrifice.
- I don’t know about you but when I read these words I can’t help but think of the story of Samuel and Saul in 1 Samuel 15. Do you remember the story? Flip back to 1 Samuel 15. Samuel, the last of the Judges, has anointed Saul to be King of Israel. But Saul is rebellious from the start. Why? Because he can’t listen and follow God. We pick up the story in 1 Samuel 15:10.
- *Then the word of the LORD came to Samuel: 11 "I am grieved that I have made Saul king, because he has turned away from me and has not carried out my instructions." Notice the failure of listening. Samuel was troubled, and he cried out to the LORD all that night. 12 Early in the morning Samuel got up and went to meet Saul, but he was told, "Saul has gone to Carmel. There he has set up a monument in his own honor and has turned and gone on down to Gilgal." 13 When Samuel reached him, Saul said, "The LORD bless you! I have carried out the LORD's instructions." 14 But Samuel said, "What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears? What is this lowing of cattle that I hear?" 15 Saul answered, "The soldiers brought them from the Amalekites; they spared the best of the sheep and cattle to sacrifice to the LORD your God, but we totally destroyed the rest." 16 "Stop!" Samuel said to Saul. "Let me tell you what the LORD said to me last night." "Tell me," Saul replied. 17 Samuel said, "Although you were once small in your own eyes, did you not become the head of the tribes of Israel? The LORD anointed you king over Israel. 18 And he sent you on a mission, saying, 'Go and completely destroy those wicked people, the Amalekites; make war on them until you have wiped them out.' 19 Why did you not obey the LORD? Why did you pounce on the plunder and do evil in the eyes of the LORD?" 20 "But I did obey the LORD," Saul said. "I went on the mission the LORD assigned me. I completely destroyed the Amalekites and brought back Agag their king. 21 The soldiers took sheep and cattle from the plunder, the*

⁵ Kidner, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 53.

⁶ Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, p. 151.

best of what was devoted to God, in order to sacrifice them to the LORD your God at Gilgal." 22 But Samuel replied: "Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams. 23 For rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance like the evil of idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has rejected you as king."

- Some of you, like Saul, need to work on your ability to listen. You have a hard time just pausing to listen to your kids or your spouse or your teacher let alone God. Even worse, like Saul, some of you have deceived yourselves into thinking you have heard from God and that you have obeyed him. You worship him with your lips but in reality your heart is far from him. What God wants more than anything else from you is for you to just shut up long enough so he can speak to you. Open his Word. Read what he has to say. He's already spoken. And listen. And then do what his word says. Quit offering up to him *the sacrifice of fools*. There are some religious practices that drive God nuts and are completely meaningless to him. Cavalier, casual, unprepared, non-listening worship is one of them.

Transition

The **second practice** comes from verses 2-3. [Slide #4] Here the Teacher singles out **loquacious prayer** as something that drives God nuts. Listen. *Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few. 3 As a dream comes when there are many cares, so the speech of a fool when there are many words.*

- When it comes to things that good religious people practice prayer is usually at the top of the list. Good religious people are supposed to pray. And while God wants us to pray to him, talk to him; he doesn't want the kind of prayer that we most often associate with organized religion. Loquacious prayer. Excessively wordy prayer. Babbling, chattering prayer. That kind of prayer drives God nuts.
- As the saying goes, "Never use a gallon of words to express a spoonful of thought."⁷ And that, in a nutshell, is what the Teacher says here in **verses 2-3**. *Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few.* Don't rush to speak in prayer. Don't speak without thinking. And let your words be few.
- I think **verse 2** here anticipates Jesus' words in Matthew 6:7-8. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. 8 Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. The last thing in the world God wants from those who worship him is **loquacious prayer**, streams of pious sounding phrases that do nothing more than grate on God's ears.⁸
- Have you ever spent time grating cheese with a grater? Next time you slip into wordy, religious prayer mode I want you to think of that image. Back and forth, cheese grinding, grating, scraping against that grater.
- **Verse 3** tells us why we should avoid **loquacious prayer**. Look at verse 3. The Teacher says, *as a dream comes when there are many cares, so the speech of a fool when there are many*

⁷ Anonymous, *Christian Reader*, "Lite Fare."

⁸ Kidner, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 54.

words. Wordy, loquacious prayers are foolish in God's eyes. They drive him nuts. In the same way that too much activity gives you restless dreams; too many words in prayer make you a fool. If you think that more words, religious sounding prayer somehow tip things in your favor you're living in a fantasy dream world.⁹ God cannot be bullied by words. Become the kind of worshiper God desires. Talk to him. But talk to him simply, with simple words, expressing simple desires, with all the sincerity and trust of a child approaching a father who deeply cares.

Transition

I really believe God cares little for religion. God wants faith. Loving religion is not the same thing as loving God. He wants our hearts. He wants us. And he wants us to trust him. Not religiosity. Not superficial religious devotion. And I think the Teacher agrees. So far we've looked at two religious practices people do that drive God nuts. **Cavalier Worship** and **loquacious prayer**. Now the **third practice** from verses 4-7. [Slide #5] **Insincere, rash vows**. Follow along. *When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow. 5 It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it. 6 Do not let your mouth lead you into sin. And do not protest to the [temple] messenger, "My vow was a mistake." Why should God be angry at what you say and destroy the work of your hands? 7 Much dreaming and many words are meaningless. Therefore stand in awe of God.*

- Religious people are really good at striking vows or bargains with God. “God, if you can just do this one thing for me I promise...” “God if you make this happen I’ll never...” “God I swear...” Have you ever said anything like that to God? Most of the time when we speak this way we have no plan to ever make good on our word. Or if we do, we try to keep our promise for a time, until our vow becomes unreasonable, or inconvenient, or we just plain forget. Don’t think you make vows? Think you’ve got this one covered? Are you married? If so, you’ve made a vow before God.
- You know what? **Insincere, rash vows** drive God nuts. They are utterly meaningless to him. In fact, the Teacher says you’re better off not making a vow than making one and not keeping it. **Verse 5**. *It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it.* Verse 5 echoes the words of Proverbs 20:25. *It is a trap for a man to dedicate something rashly and only later to consider his vows.*
- God’s not against vows. He’s not against promises made. Just keep your promises. Don’t try to worm your way out of a decision you have made before God.¹⁰ **Verse 4**. *He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow.*
- In the New Testament Jesus criticizes the Pharisees for not keeping their vows—for weaseling out of their vows. The Pharisees were making promises, swearing oaths on objects like the temple or altar or the gold of the temple. By swearing on something less serious, less grave, less significant than swearing by God, they felt they were freed from the binding power of their vow. Matthew 23:16-22. Listen to what Jesus says. *“Woe to you, blind guides! You say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.’ 17 You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred? 18 You also say, ‘If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gift on it, he is bound by his oath.’ 19*

⁹ Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, p. 152-3.

¹⁰ Swindoll, *Living on the Ragged Edge*, p. 50.

You blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred? 20 Therefore, he who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. 21 And he who swears by the temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it. 22 And he who swears by heaven swears by God's throne and by the one who sits on it.

- In other words, Jesus says, all oaths, all promises, all vows are in a sense made before God and all are equally binding.¹¹ So if you're going to vow something, keep your vow. Otherwise, back to Ecclesiastes, [verse 6](#), *don't let your mouth lead you into sin*. Don't be rash with your words. In the name of religion, don't make promises you don't intend to keep. *Why should God be angry at what you say and destroy the work of your hands? 7 Much dreaming and many words are meaningless. Therefore stand in awe of God.*

Conclusion

- Again, the repeated message of Ecclesiastes is that there is no meaning in life on this earth under the sun apart from the God of the Bible. Not even in religion. The purpose of this book, the purpose of this journey with the Teacher, is not to drive us to religion or religiosity. That too is chasing after the wind. The purpose of Ecclesiastes is to drive us to God.
- Theologian [Alexander Schmemmann](#) has said, "One can love religion like anything else in life: sports, science, stamp collecting. One can love it for its own sake without relation to God or the world or life. Religion fascinates; it is entertaining. It has everything that is sought after by a certain type of person: aesthetics, mystery, the sacred, a feeling of one's importance and exclusive depth, etc. That kind of religion is not necessarily faith."¹²
- Jesus said to the woman at the well in John 4:23 *Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks*. Are you the kind of worshiper God is seeking? Or do you just love religion that's meaningless? What God wants from us is faith, a relationship of listening, simple trust, and obedience. He wants us to believe who he says he is. He wants us to take him at his word. He wants us to believe and trust in Christ, the one he sent to save us from our lostness in sin. He wants us to *stand in awe of Him* and worship him in the ways he prescribes not necessarily the ways we invent or like or prefer. With all this in mind. Let's continue to worship.

¹¹ Grant Osborne, Notes on Matthew's Gospel, p. 137.

¹² Mark Galli, "The Thirst of the 24/7 Fan," *Christianity Today* (3-28-05)