

Vanity in the House of God
Ecclesiastes 5:1-3; Psalm 16:11
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When we consider the vanity and emptiness of man in his endless pursuit for joy and happiness through the pleasure he seeks, in the possessions he covets, and in the power he craves, we usually associate that vanity with only his secular and worldly endeavors. As Christians, we acknowledge that a person is going to find that all his worldly activities in seeking for an enduring satisfaction (apart from Christ) are going to pass away as quickly as a vapor or a mist that is present and disappears when the sun begins to shine. You cannot build a house of joy upon the foundation of vapor or mist. But you can build a house of joy upon the foundation of the everlasting Rock, namely, the Lord Jesus Christ. King Solomon has clearly demonstrated in Ecclesiastes (thus far) the vanity and vapor-like satisfaction to be found in our quest for a lasting happiness, if we seek it apart from faith in and obedience to Jesus Christ. You simply are not going to find a contentment that endures and lasts in that which can be lost in this life and in that which will perish when you die.

So we are agreed that a lasting joy is not to be found in the changing circumstances and people of this world. Where do we now look? Let's look at the worship of God. Surely, if a lasting joy is to be found anywhere, we will find it in the House of God. Right? Solomon says, "Not so quick." For, you see, vanity and emptiness can follow us into the very presence of God, just as easily as they can follow us into the presence of people, possessions, pleasures, and power. As Christians, there is no better place to be and no greater pleasure to enjoy than in the presence of the Lord ("Thou wilt shew me the path of life: in thy presence is fullness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore" Psalm 16:11). How does that which should bring us the greatest joy and satisfaction (namely, the worship of God) end up bringing us vanity, emptiness, and vexation of spirit? This is the question we will consider today. From our text, let us consider the following main points: (1) The Vanity of Mere External Worship (Ecclesiastes 5:1); and (2) The Vanity of an Unprepared Heart (Ecclesiastes 5:2-3).

I. The Vanity of Mere External Worship (Ecclesiastes 5:1).

A. First, I have some preliminary remarks about worship before considering more closely our text.

1. The place where one might expect all vanity to be left at the door is the very place where Solomon now leads us: into the House of God. When Solomon says that all is vanity and emptiness in finding a lasting joy and happiness apart from faith in and obedience to Christ, he means ALL. For the "all is vanity" even includes our worship together today on this Lord's Day. For, dear ones, even worship can be misused and perverted by us to our sin and shame, as we shall see. Does this not reveal to us the absolute truth of Christ's words, "Without me ye can do nothing" (John 15:5)?

2. The blessings of God that are yours to receive in the sanctuary (as well as outside the sanctuary) do not automatically yield the joy of the Lord just because you show up and perform them. You cannot mechanically turn on the grace of God like you turn on a faucet to receive water. Dear ones, this is not the biblical approach to worship at all. The Lord is not pleased with, nor does He receive your worship when you merely fulfill the outward acts of worship, while your hearts, thoughts, and desires are a million miles away from Him. This is simply the worship of the Pharisees, whom Jesus condemned when He said, "This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoreth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me" (Matthew 15:8). This is likewise the abominable view of the Roman Catholic Church which teaches that the mere outward administration of the sacraments automatically issues in grace, even apart from faith in the recipient (as long as there is no mortal sin blocking that grace).

3. I submit to you that even if you do precisely what God commands you to do outwardly in worship by the use of Psalms without instruments, by the use of prayer using exactly the right words in addressing God, and by the use of the most faithful version of the Bible in reading and preaching, but do so without an ever growing faith in your Savior and love for Him, you are nothing and your worship is nothing. In fact, it is worse than nothing—it is a grievous sin and abomination to your God as we shall see (“for they consider not that they do evil” Ecclesiastes 5:1). The answer to this vanity in worship is not to forsake what God has commanded you in His Word to bring to Him by way of outward forms of worship (that you ought to do and must do if you would be faithful to the Lord). The answer to this vanity in worship is to bring not only your outward sacrifices in purity of worship, but to bring hearts filled with reverence, brokenness, faith, love, and thankfulness to the Lord as you worship Him.

4. Dear ones, there is something that you must understand about worship (especially the public worship of God) if you are to worship the Lord as He authorizes. The word “worship” is a shortened form of the Old English word “worthship.” Worship (or worthship) is ascribing worth and worthiness to the Lord, which He alone deserves. It is seeing your own unworthiness due to your sin and corruption, but His own worthiness due to the absolute perfection of His being, attributes, and ways. In the glory of such light, you are humbled and broken that you would even be permitted to gaze upon such glory (let alone to enjoy the blessedness of unmerited love, grace, and mercy in the forgiveness of God, the righteousness of Christ, and the communion with the Holy Spirit). Let the eye of faith ever gaze upon the glory of your holy King when you approach Him in worship (Isaiah 6:1-7).

5. Worship is not about you or me, it is about God. Worship is not about you feeling good, it is about God being exalted and honored. The result of you honoring and exalting your Creator, Provider, and Savior is indeed that you are blessed with His grace, with His love, with His peace, and with His joy. Your worship of your Savior on the Lord’s Day is always to be a dialogue in which God speaks to you by His Word and Spirit (through the reading and preaching of Scripture), and you respond by speaking to Him (through the congregational prayers and singing of Psalms). God initiates, you respond. God graciously loves you and saves you; you respond in trusting Him, loving Him, and obeying Him. God graciously calls you to worship Him; you respond by coming to worship Him in faith, love, and obedience. God graciously covenants with you to be your God; you respond by covenanting with Him to be His people in faith, love, and obedience. Why have you come to worship today? To see this person or that person? To receive a blessing? To avoid the guilt you would feel if you did not come? Although you ought to gather for fellowship with one another on the Lord’s Day, and although you ought to desire to be blessed by the Lord when you gather as God’s people, and although it is a duty to come, your primary purpose in gathering today is to worship the Lord your God. If you do not have that straight, nothing else about your worship will be straight. All will be crooked, because your worship will be man-centered rather than God-centered. You will be focused merely upon your needs and your desires, rather than upon glorifying and enjoying the God of your salvation.

B. Now let us consider what Solomon says from our text. If you would shun and flee from vanity in the worship of Almighty God, Solomon says “keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God.” In other words, watch your steps that you do not stumble and fall into sin as you approach the Lord your God. For, dear ones, approaching God is unlike approaching anyone else. If you would be careful in the way you approach one who is interviewing you for a job that you really want (watching carefully that you are respectful, that you do not talk too much, and communicating that you desire to be there), how much more you should be careful in the way you approach the one true living God. Let not your steps into the presence of an infinitely holy God be like your steps into the presence of a mere human being. Solomon says in effect, “Don’t be careless.” For if you are careless and do not watch your steps as you approach the Lord, your worship will be vain and it will not bring forth the joy of the Lord.

1. The House of God of which Solomon here speaks would have been the Temple, which Solomon himself was called by God to build for the Lord. That is where God's people were called to worship Him in the appointed times ordained by the Lord. However, since the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ to suffer and die for His people, the Lord is building a new and more glorious Temple—one made of living stones rather than dead stones—one made of redeemed sinners, Christ Himself being the foundation and chief corner stone (according to 1 Peter 2:4-5).

2. Thus, the House of God for us is not a building of mortar and stones. It is the people of God, who gather as one on the Lord's Day to worship and praise our Savior. Just as the Lord graciously filled the Temple of old with His presence, and met with His people there, even so we see in the Book of Revelation (Chapter One) that the Lord Jesus Christ appears in a vision to the Apostle John, girded as our High Priest and walking in the midst of His people, examining their hearts and evaluating their words and deeds. The presence of God in and among us as His holy Temple is as much of a certainty as was the presence of God in the Temple of old. In fact, the presence of God in the old Temple was really a promise of His presence with us in this new Temple (the Church of Jesus Christ). We (as Christ's New Covenant Temple) may not have all the outward glitter and glory of the Temple of old, but we have the far greater glory of our crucified and risen Savior walking in our midst. Therefore, dear ones, watch your steps, for the Lord your God is walking in your midst and meeting with you as you worship Him today.

C. Solomon continues with another exhortation, if you would shun and flee from vanity in the worship of Almighty God: "and be more ready to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools." Here we see that the inward aspects of worship (ready to hear) are contrasted with the outward aspects of worship (sacrifices).

1. This contrast does not imply that the outward forms of worship are unimportant and immaterial to our worship of the one true living God; for it is not outward worship that is condemned. It is not sacrifices (in that worship of the Old Testament) that are condemned, but rather "the sacrifices of fools". The Lord specifically prescribed for His people in the Old Testament how to worship Him by way of outward acts, and the Lord likewise has prescribed how we in the New Testament are to worship Him by way of outward acts (Exodus 20:4-6; Colossians 2:20-23). You are not allowed to worship God by way of your own inventions, which is called, "will-worship" (i.e. worshipping God according to your own will). A graven image in the Second Commandment stands for anything you might introduce by your own will into the worship of God. All graven images and all innovations that come from man's own devising are absolutely forbidden in the worship of God (whether it be the singing of man-made hymns, or the use of musical instruments, or images of Christ, or images of a cross, or skits and plays, or choirs). None of these have warrant from the New Testament Scriptures in our New Covenant worship. What does have warrant from the New Testament Scriptures are these ordinary acts of worship: reading and preaching of God's Word, prayer, the singing of Psalms without instruments, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper. You must jealousy guard and keep pure these outward acts of worship, for the Lord alone have a right to command what is acceptable to Him in worship.

2. What makes a sacrifice (or any outward worship) that which may be called "the sacrifice [or worship] of fools?" When you do not come prepared to worship the Lord and ready to hear Him speak to you. For, dear ones, "ready to hear" implies that you are looking in faith to Christ, broken before the Lord over your sin and His great love, and anxious to obey Him. "Ready to hear" implies you are sitting on the edge of your seats, hearts and minds ready and prepared to worship the Lord. "Ready to hear" implies that you want to hear with the ear of faith the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, to hear that Christ has borne all your sin in His own body, to hear that He is your righteousness and that your love and obedience do not add in the least to your justification, but are a sacrifice of thanksgiving to Christ for such undeserved love. We read in Proverbs 21:27: "The sacrifice of the wicked is abomination: how much more, when he bringeth it with a wicked mind?" The wicked may (like Cain) bring acts of worship which God has not commanded, but notice

that a “wicked mind” likewise makes your worship an abomination to the Lord. King Saul (you will recall) offered animals as sacrifices to the Lord when he was told by God to destroy all of the animals that he gathered from the spoil of the Amalekites. Although outwardly he sacrificed to the Lord, his heart was not right with God, for his sacrifice did not proceed from faith, love, and obedience to God. The Lord spoke to Saul (and to us all) through the prophet Samuel with this scathing rebuke, “Hath 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 hearken than the fat of rams” (1 Samuel 15:22). Saul was sacrificing with a heart that was far away from the Lord, when he should have been ready to hear and to obey the Lord in worship.

3. Note carefully, Solomon says that those who worship the Lord by mere external acts (apart from faith, repentance, love, and obedience) do not consider that “they do evil.” God is not pleased to simply have you show up for worship, if what is important to you is simply going through the outward forms of worship. It is evil to do so. Someone may ask, “Is it better not to come to worship at all than to come and merely go through the outward forms of worship?” Neither of these options is right or lawful. There is sin associated with either option. It is sin to avoid the worship of God (unless prevented from doing so due to deeds of necessity or mercy), and it is also sin to worship when your heart is not trusting Christ, loving Christ, and obeying Christ. So the correct answer is, it is better to do neither. It is better (yea best) to come to worship the God of your salvation in faith, love, and obedience. Dear ones, it is not evil to come to worship bringing your sins to Christ, bringing your disappointments to Christ, bringing your sorrows to Christ, bringing your afflictions and trials to Christ, and bringing your struggles to Christ (according to 1 Peter 5:7). It is not your weaknesses that make your worship a mere formality. It is your pride that makes your worship a mere formality. It is your acknowledged weaknesses and sins that humble you and drive you to your Savior to see in Him the God of your help, the God of your refuge and strength, and the God of your salvation. Thus, dear ones, let us hear the parable of the Lord in Luke 18:9-14. The Publican was ready to hear. The Pharisee offered the sacrifice of fools. The Publican left the place of worship having every reason to be full of the joy of the Lord, while the Pharisee left the place of worship having every reason to be full of the misery of his own pride.

II. The Vanity of an Unprepared Heart (Ecclesiastes 5:2-3).

A. Solomon not only would have you flee vanity in worship by shunning a mere outward form worship, but also by shunning an unprepared heart. Obviously, there is a relationship between mere outward worship and an unprepared heart. One major reason why you go through the mere motions of worship is because you have not prepared yourselves for worship.

1. You have just showed up for worship, as if you were just going to visit some friends, rather than to appear before God almighty. Sadly, the world makes more preparation to go to a football game than do Christians so often in coming to worship our infinitely holy God. Sadly, the worship of God in so many churches has become so casual and even flippant. Emphasis upon preparation for worship is nonexistent. God is presented in churches today in such common terms that He is just a good friend; or God is just our Daddy. Jesus is indeed a friend to sinners, and God is our Heavenly Father, but let us never forget that Christ is the holy Son of God and that God is our exalted HEAVENLY Father. Churches are so interested in bringing God down to our level that God is no longer God. God is no longer One to be feared with reverence, awe, and wonder. God is no longer absolutely almighty, holy, and just. God no longer hates and despises sin and the wicked who walk in their rebellious ways. God is no longer high and lifted up, but is common, and is just like us. But Solomon reminds us that “God is in heaven, and thou upon earth” (Ecclesiastes 5:2). Solomon rebukes all forms of worship that minimize the solemnity, the reverence, and the preparation we should have as we approach Almighty God. There is not to be vain, careless, repetition in worship (where we say Amen after the prayer simply because everyone else is saying it). Nor do you deny the joy of the Lord by practicing a

reverence and due preparation in the presence of God. You cannot rejoice in the Lord, if you do not take the Lord seriously. Solomon states at the conclusion of this section on worship in Ecclesiastes 5:7: “but fear thou God.”

2. Another approach that has become ever so popular among the churches of today is to come to be entertained. Everything is geared to the entertainment of men, women, and children. From the bands and vocalists, to the humor and comedy of the pastor, to the skits and dancing; it all focuses upon pleasing and entertaining man rather than appearing before God and offering to Him the worship that He commands. This flippant approach to worship is vanity and will not lead to the joy of the Lord, regardless of what its proponents might say.

B. Solomon gives us a picture of one who is more interested in speaking whatever comes to his mind in the presence of God than of hearing what God has to say (“Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God” Ecclesiastes 5:2). What a different view of worship than we hear about so often today. I do not believe our worship services ought to be dead and lifeless. But dear ones, it is not a band that gives life. It is not humor and comedy that gives life. It is not drama and dancing that give life. It is the Spirit of God that gives life, and He does so ordinarily by working through His own divinely appointed ordinances in worship (reading and preaching the Word of God, singing the Psalms with grace in the heart, praying with faith in the Lord, and administering the sacraments as signs and seals of the Covenant of Grace). What practical steps ought you to take if you are serious about preparing yourself to worship the Lord on His Sabbath?

1. Get a good night’s rest before coming to worship. Prepare Saturday night for worship on the Lord’s Day. It is not wrong to fellowship with brethren on Saturday night, but it should not be such that you cannot stay awake during the sermon because you have played games or talked to all hours of the night and into the wee hours of the morning.

2. Seek always to be reconciled with others before coming to worship (not just before coming to the Lord’s Supper) in accordance with Matthew 5:23-24.

3. Prepare your hearts for worship by spending time with the Lord in secret (confessing sin, seeking God’s forgiveness, praying for your minister in proclaiming faithfully the Word of God, praying for others). Likewise instruct your children in preparing their hearts to come into the presence of Almighty God.

4. Upon arriving, greet the brethren quietly, but be quick to find your seats, take the children to the restroom, and quietly meditate upon the Word or silently prepare your heart in prayer.

5. Approach worship with the mind that you are first and foremost to give to God rather than to receive from God. You will receive from God as you first give to God the worship that is due to Him.

6. Be ready to hear what God will say to you. Be alert. If you are drowsy, stand in the back. Don’t fall asleep when God is speaking to you. Don’t be distracted by the pleasures and cares of the world when God is speaking to you. Don’t you as parents become frustrated with your children when they do not listen to you because they are distracted? Children, God speaks to you as well in His Word as it is read and preached. Be like the child, Samuel, who said to God when God spoke to him, “Speak; for thy servant heareth” (1 Samuel 3:10).

C. Finally, Solomon says (in effect) that just as a busy life during the day issues in a busy dream at night, so likewise a fool brings forth many foolish words in worship (Ecclesiastes 5:3). Why? Because he has not prepared himself for worship. Dear ones, there is no joy for the fool in worship, because he goes through the mere outward forms of worship in offering the sacrifice of a fool. This is to bring your vanity, rather than your joy into the House of God.