

Week 7 - Handle With Care - Ecclesiastes 5:1-7

Scripture Reading: Psalm 89:1-7

Introduction

When I was growing up, I thought two things would prove to be more of a danger in my life than they have - quicksand and nitroglycerin.

Maybe my unfounded concern came from watching too many jungle movies where someone was always blundering into a pool of quicksand and cowboy movies where it seemed they often handled vials of nitroglycerin.

No one ever saw the quicksand until it was too late, but the nitro was always in a wooden crate with big black block letters that read, "Handle with care," stenciled on the side.

Inside were bottles packed in cotton wadding or excelsior.

The people always moved very slowly and handled the crates gingerly as they transported them lest the slightest bump set off an explosion.

It was always extra dangerous if the nitro was sweating.

For some reason, I thought those things would be more of a problem than they've proven to be in my life.

There isn't much quicksand in Wisconsin, and nowadays, when I see a box labeled "Handle with care," it's typically because the item inside is fragile.

But I still keep my eyes open for random pools of the stuff, and "handle with care" is a warning it pays to heed.

Looking back over what we've seen in Ecclesiastes so far, we saw Qoheleth begin by describing how life under the sun is futile - *hebel* - vanity of vanities and chasing after the wind.

We've followed his exhaustive and extensive exploration as he took every path he could as far as he could, only to discover the same thing at the end of each road.

Qoheleth had a glimpse of the possibilities of life under heaven in Chapter 3 when he discovered how God determines the events and patterns of our lives.

But he slipped backward when he tried to reconcile that reality with the prevalence of injustice and oppression in the world.

Then, last week, we saw Qoheleth offer some practical advice regarding how to find balance through living in cooperation with others and being content.

When we get to the end of the book, Qoheleth finally reaches the goal of his spiritual quest.

He discovers what gives life meaning, as he declares in 12:13 [**Ecclesiastes 12:13**] that man's duty is to "*fear God and keep his commandments.*"

The flow of Ecclesiastes is from meaninglessness and vanity to reverence and meaning.

And I'm glad Qoheleth shows us glimpses of the end along the way because the journey would come close to being overwhelming otherwise.

Our focus passage today is one that gives us a glimpse at our destination as he introduces the concept of worship and proper fear - or reverence - of God.

This is a practical passage directed at churchgoers as Qoheleth tells us how to approach attendance at a worship service.

Remember, Qoheleth wasn't an atheist; he most definitely believed in God, and he isn't writing to unbelievers as he preaches about how to worship.

These instructions have the same relevance for us today as they did to the people of his day.

Look with me at the first part of verse 1 [**Ecclesiastes 5:1a**], where Qoheleth writes:

Guard your steps when you go to the house of God.

If effect, he's saying, "Watch out!"

It's a warning which tells us there's danger in worship.

So, let me ask, how do you approach coming to church on Sunday?

I suspect it's a pretty casual thing for most of us.

After all, this is where our friends are, and we're safe and comfortable here.

But maybe we're too comfortable, and we should post signs saying "Handle with Care" at the entrances.

Next Sunday is Easter, and part of Easter is to consider how Jesus' death and resurrection opened the way to the Father for all believers.

But, in the Old Testament, the faithful could go into the courtyard of the Tabernacle.

However, they only had access to God through the priests.

And the priests themselves had to undertake a serious ritual of purification and preparation and approach God in a very specific way lest he strike them dead, as happened to Aaron's sons when they violated God's rules.

If you're interested, you can read about the steps the high priest had to take to enter the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16.

But for today, we'll suffice it to say God takes coming into his presence seriously - and so should we.

Perhaps not to the point where we ritually bathe and anoint ourselves with oil, but more seriously than we do because we can tend to be too casual and get too chummy with God.

I believe that's part of what Qoheleth meant to express in the middle of verse 2 of our passage when he reminds his readers that God is in heaven and you are on earth.

We need to remember our place.

And when we come to worship, Qoheleth says there are three things we must do.

We must listen up, watch our mouths, and refrain from playing games with God.

Let me encourage you to open your Bible and join me in Ecclesiastes 5 so you can follow along as I read verse 1 [**Ecclesiastes 5:1**] –

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.

I. Listen Up!

The first thing we must do is open our ears.

Qoheleth says it's better to "draw near to listen," which naturally implies there will be something to listen to.

We rightly understand that to mean we must pay attention to God's Word.

I want you to consider why you come to this place each Sunday.

Perhaps some of you come because you know that's what a Christ-follower is supposed to do.

After all, the author of Hebrews [**Hebrews 10:25**] warns against neglecting to gather together.

Then again, maybe some of you are here merely because it's your habit to be here; it's the way you were raised and what you've always done, and you wouldn't know where else to be on a Sunday morning.

You may come to meet your friends and catch up with them.

Or, maybe you're here trying to earn favor with God.

I suspect all of those reasons and more are represented in churches worldwide.

But Qoheleth says the first question you should ask yourself as you prepare to come to worship is: "Am I prepared to listen to the voice of God, to truly *hear* what he says, and put it into action?"

Both attention and obedience are implied in Qoheleth's use of the word "listen."

God expects us to do what he says and not just hear his words, as we see in 1 Samuel 15:22 and James 1:22.

I know all too well how difficult it can be to listen some Sundays - trust me, I've been there.

There's a reason I pray for you every Sunday as we open the service that God would remove those things trying to distract you from hearing his voice.

The world is loud, and the echo of its cares and concerns can keep us from hearing as our wandering thoughts take us elsewhere.

It's so easy to go through the motions and even look attentive while the sound washes over us and God's Word goes in one ear and out the other unhindered, unabsorbed, and unheeded.

Qoheleth doesn't mince words when describing such a person, saying that inattentive attendance is the mark of a fool.

I suppose being an unwitting fool is better than being a rebellious rogue, but not by much, as we read in verse 4 how God takes no pleasure in fools.

It pays to be reminded that Qoheleth is talking about the people in the pews, the well-meaning person who shows up faithfully enough but only listens with half an ear and never absorbs what God has for them.

And they don't even realize that what they are doing isn't just foolish; it's evil because they are despising God's Word - even if unwittingly.

God speaks to us through his Word - I'm sure that I don't need to convince any of you on that point.

Therefore, when you attend a worship service, you should come expecting to hear from God.

And you should come with the same attitude as Mary of Bethany who sat at her Lord's feet, hanging on his every word.

II. Watch Your Mouth!

The second thing you need to do when you come to worship is watch your mouth.

Qoheleth is concerned not only with how we listen but also with how we speak.

Look with me at verse 2 [**Ecclesiastes 5:2**] which says:

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.

Qoheleth rightly describes our tendency to talk more than we should.

We often speak without thinking, not just to other people but also when we talk to God.

Qoheleth is mainly concerned about our speech patterns before God in the house of worship, as the phrase "before God" indicates, but his advice is sound whenever we pray.

Jesus taught in **Matthew 6:7** that his followers are not to "*heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do,*" thinking that God will be persuaded by many words.

I can't help but think of the priests of Baal in Elijah's day who prayed long and with great intensity while Elijah offered a short, earnest prayer to God, who answered him.

In 1 Kings 18, we read how the priests of Baal prayed to their god from morning to noon, then into the evening, and even cut themselves to get his attention.

But then Elijah stepped forward and prayed two short sentences in **1 Kings 18:36-37** saying:

“O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your word. Answer me, O LORD, answer me, that this people may know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back.”

Notice how short and to the point Elijah’s prayer was.

He didn’t pile words upon words or use flowery phrases and high-sounding language - he simply asked God to do what he needed God to do - and God responded.

It’s not the loudness of our voice nor the number of our words that move God, but the earnestness of our hearts.

Still, there are likely far more prayerless prayers of many pious-sounding words offered to God that amount to little more than verbal doodling.

That seems to be Qoheleth’s meaning in verse 3 [**Ecclesiastes 5:3**], where he writes:

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

It’s hard to utter wise words all the time, and the more one talks, the greater the opportunity to say something foolish.

As a general rule, fools tend to talk a lot.

They rarely keep their thoughts to themselves, and everything that pops into their heads spews forth from their lips.

The Lord’s brother, James, sums up what Qoheleth has said in these first few verses of Chapter 5 in **James 1:19**, saying:

“Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak.”

However, as simple as that sounds, that command is more challenging than it appears on the surface.

James makes that abundantly clear in Chapter 3 of his epistle, writing in **James 3:2** that anyone who can master his tongue is a perfect man.

Still, it’s an endeavor we must undertake because, as Qoheleth writes in verse 2 [**Ecclesiastes 5:2**], *“God is in heaven and [we] are on earth.”*

Qoheleth isn’t merely giving us a theological geography lesson here; he’s talking about our position relative to God.

He is the Creator, and we are his creation, and when we come to worship, we need to be mindful of that.

We must consider the words we say, the songs we sing, the Scripture we recite, and the prayers we pray and make sure that we are saying what we mean and meaning what we say.

We must be sure that the words we speak come from the heart, accurately reflect our opinions, and are what we honestly believe.

And we must recognize that, in many cases, we would benefit from following God’s instruction in **Psalms 46:10** and simply remain still.

We find Qoheleth’s third exhortation in verses 4-5 as he shows us that God isn’t just concerned with words - what we do also matters to God [**Ecclesiastes 5:4-5**].

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

After telling us to listen up and watch what we say, Qoheleth now tells us what to do, and he says, “Do what you say you are going to do,” or, “Don’t play games with God!”

III. Don't Play Games!

Qoheleth is speaking specifically here of vows or promises we make to God.

In the Old Testament, we see many references to people making vows to God as a part of their worship.

A vow was a holy promise made to God.

And a vow was typically fulfilled by a gift or sacrifice to God, as the psalmist described in **Psalm 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.

In **Psalm 65:1**, we read how praise is due to God and vows should be performed to God.

Then, in Leviticus 22, we read about acceptable sacrifices for fulfilling those vows [**Leviticus 22:18-20**].

In plain terms, Qoheleth was saying nothing more complex here than "Keep your promises to God."

We live in a day when a person's word is cheap, promises are often forgotten, and commitments are superficial and flexible.

Take the world of sports as an example.

Athletes regularly negotiate and sign contracts they believe are beneficial to themselves.

Then, when they have a better year than expected, they commonly renege on the deal and demand to renegotiate for better terms.

It's funny, but you never hear of anyone wanting to renegotiate after having a bad year.

Sadly, such actions and attitudes aren't limited to the sports world or business, and an often overlooked and unappreciated sin in the church is the sin of broken vows.

Let's face it: it's far easier to make a promise than to keep one.

And people make and break promises with God regularly - especially when they find themselves in a jam and bargaining with God to get them out of it.

If you've ever offered a prayer like that, you know how easy it is to forget what you promised.

Frankly, it's amazing how quickly we can forget all about our vow once the crisis has passed.

In fact, the more time we allow to elapse between making the promise and fulfilling it, the more apt we are to forget it.

That's why Qoheleth says we should not delay in paying it.

A quick follow-through on meeting an obligation is a sign of godliness.

None of this should make us think that making promises to God is a bad thing - not at all.

Vows are biblical, and they can serve as catalysts for action.

We simply need to be wise, serious, and thoughtful when we make them.

A promise made to God is a serious transaction requiring much prayer and consideration - they should never be entered into quickly or casually.

We should beware of the temptation to make a big vow in order to sway God.

Vows should only be made about essential matters, and what we promise must be attainable.

We should limit our vows, considering that we might find our circumstances have changed and we cannot fulfill a promise as we intended.

Most importantly, we need to recognize that a vow, once made, is binding, and breaking a vow is sin that may incur God's temporal judgment.

In verse 6 [**Ecclesiastes 5:6**], Qoheleth says:

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?

In other words, God isn't into "Oops!"

We don't get to say, "You know what? I made a mistake when I made that promise. I'm older and wiser now, so let's just chalk that up to youthful indiscretion. M'kay?"

God takes our promises seriously and doesn't grant exemptions, so it's best that we also take them seriously.

We make them wisely and pay them quickly.

Qoheleth sums up this section by describing the heart attitude we ought to have when we come to worship.

In verse 7 [**Ecclesiastes 5:7**], he writes:

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

In this instance, I think Qoheleth refers to the daydreams, idle thoughts, and words of a churchgoer who shows up to see their friends and join in on a good sing but never really gets around to true worship.

Sadly, many who faithfully attend and participate in the church's activities never really offer their hearts and minds to God.

They don't come expecting to hear from God - so they don't.

They talk far more than they listen and are seldom still before the Lord.

They make quick promises and break them just as quickly.

But when we have a proper fear of God, we will come ready to listen to what he has to say so that we can do it.

We will be cautious about what we say and limit our speech to words that please him and come from the heart.

We will give God what he deserves and meet our obligations in whatever promises we have made.

In other words, we'll take worship seriously.

Conclusion

Qoheleth begins this section by warning his readers to guard their steps when they come to worship.

So, how do we do that?

First, we need to prepare ourselves for worship.

Many things we do in this life require no preparation because their primary purpose is to entertain us, and we can just show up - but worship isn't one of them.

Think of how much effort you would put into getting ready to meet with anyone important, and then consider that you are going to meet with the Great I AM.

You believe Jesus' words from **Matthew 18:20**, don't you?

That when we gather together in his name, he is here with us and desires to fellowship with us?

In Exodus 19, when God instructed the people of Israel who were about to enter his presence in worship, he reminded them of who he is, and the people prepared themselves to stand before him.

God calls us to worship him in spirit and truth [**John 4:24**], so we must take pains to ensure we have done more than get dressed and make it here on time.

We need to make sure we are ready to meet with the Most High and stand before him with pure hearts and open minds.

Part of being prepared to worship God as we should involves being physically ready, which extends to how we spend our Saturday night and Sunday morning.

Staying up late so we're short on sleep and rushing around looking for a missing sock, wolfing down breakfast, finding the car is low on gas, and barely making it on time rushed and out of sorts is no way to prepare to meet the King.

Instead, we should aim to arrive in plenty of time before the service starts to give us time to greet one another and still have time to quietly prepare our hearts and minds to hear from God.

We should also prepare to participate because worship isn't a passive experience.

You should raise your voice in song [**Psalm 100:1-2**] and make a joyful noise to the Lord rather than waiting to be entertained.

You should join your heart in prayer, add your "amen" to the prayers offered, and present your tithes and offerings cheerfully.

And you should be prepared to receive as you listen to the message from God's Word.

God has taken care of two of the most crucial aspects of the teaching ministry.

He has provided us with his written Word and his Holy Spirit to convey it to our hearts.

However, there is a human component that we must prepare for.

For communication to occur, it must be both transmitted and received.

So, it requires a prepared speaker who studies and faithfully presents God's message and a prepared listener who receives and acts on it.

I typically spend between 20-30 hours each week studying and writing the Sunday sermon, so it seems only proper that you all might take a moment to still yourself and ask God to clear your mind and prepare your heart to receive it.

When we gather together to worship, we enter the presence of our holy God as the body of Christ to honor him and hear his Word.

Not as a duty or to earn points with God but to hear from him and see what he wants us to do.

So, we should come with a sense of reverence and expectation, ready to listen, taking care to please him with our words, prepared to respond to his leading and direction, and committed to doing his will.

Let's pray.