

Transcription of 13ID1376

Ecclesiastes 5:1-7

"The Worshiper Before His God"

February 24, 2013

Shall we open our Bibles this morning to the book of Ecclesiastes, as we continue with Solomon in chapter 5:1?

Solomon writing this book, in the middle years of his life, as his wives (many of them) turned his heart away from the Lord, and he went on a quest to try to find life apart from God. He called it "under the sun," and he found great frustration. He used the word "vanity" over and over. It's empty. There's really nothing left over here. By the time he gets to chapter 12, and various places in between, he'll come back to the Lord where he belongs. But we've been going on this journey with him, and it's a good place to be. It's a great book to witness to your friends in the world because this is what they're looking for, what he saw, and you'll have something to share with them.

This morning, we go with Solomon, in verses 1-7, to watch people come to worship. There are a lot of people in church today, in many places. But there are others who just go to church maybe three times in their life - the day that they're baptized, the day that they're married, the day that they die. Or if you want to remember them - when they're hatched, when they're matched and when they're dispatched. (Laughing) That's about it. And folks have a lot of good reasons, or they think they do, to not go to church at all.

I actually read a little sermon that a pastor did I thought was pretty inventive. He wrote that he took the excuses that he heard as to why people didn't go to church, and he applied them to going to his professional football team games in town. And he said, they don't sound quite as convincing. So here's what he wrote. "The people with whom I had to sit down there at the game weren't very friendly. The seats were too hard, not very comfortable. The coach never came to talk to me personally at all. The referee often made decisions with which I could not agree. And I was sitting with a lot of hypocrites. They came to cheer for the opposition. They wore clothes that mocked my allegiances. And then, some of the games went into overtime, and I got home late. The band played some songs I've never heard of before, and many of the games were scheduled at times when I wanted to do something else. My parents took me to way too many games when I was growing up, and now I don't really want to take my kids. I read a book on sports, and I think I

know better now - than the coach - how the game should be played. I don't want to take my children to the game because I don't want to influence them. I'd rather when they get older, choose which sport they liked. Maybe when they get older." It sounds silly now, doesn't it? But those are the excuses you often hear.

Church attendance in Solomon's day had nothing to do, really, with any kind of a discussion because Solomon built the Temple through things that his dad had gathered together. God had instructed and folks gathered in droves every week - flocked there to meet with God. And since Solomon's home was just a stone's throw away, he could easily sit on the porch and observe how people came to worship or to meet with God. That's what Solomon had been doing back in chapter 2:12 - he turned from experiencing everything to just observing and making kind of determinations and conclusions. So, in verse 12 of chapter 2, he starts to just consider rather than to participate in this life "under the sun" - horizontal plane apart from God. And he sits back and makes his conclusions, but in so doing, he takes us down these many false roads, and he kind of pulls the veneer off of all of them, you know? There's life here, but there wasn't. And so he's pulled the veneer off of materialism and of sensuality and entrepreneurialism, even. He's shown us there isn't much profit in any of that. It's like fluff, it's like soap bubbles when they burst - they leave a film, but that's about it.

So, this morning, we go with Solomon to watch the spiritual activities of men - not the worldly ones, the practices and the ambitions he's been talking about, but here the spiritual pursuits of men; in particular, his approach to the Temple, the very place that he had built for them. In modern terms, we could say of these seven verses, we go with Solomon to church. We go to watch people come.

Now let me ask you something. Why are you here today? You don't have to yell out the answers. It'll be all right. But why did you come? With what attitude did you come here this morning? And what do you expect to get? And what do you expect to leave here? Or to give? Or to accomplish?

Solomon watched people come with their sacrifices to the priest, wearing their best robes, standing before others, praying prayers of dedication and commitment and devotion. And Solomon was pretty discouraged. He saw a lot of things that he saw as ritualistic rather than relational, and he hated it. Even from his point of view, it didn't sound good at all.

Oftentimes, in fact every year, there is some organization that does surveys as to how many folks in America go to church, and the numbers are always extremely high. And you want to say to yourself, "Well, if all those people are in church, why are we living the way we're living?" But this year they did a survey in January, and they asked people, "How many of you went to church?" And those who said, "Yes" (and that was a huge number - well over 80% actually, in our country), then they said, "How much impact does your church attendance have upon the way you live?" And the number dropped to 16%. So there's a lot of folks just in church. They're there all the time, but what they hear, what they learn, why they go, has absolutely no impact on their behavior, on their pursuits, on their outlooks, on their values, on their habits - none.

So, Solomon sits and watches people come, and he talks about - in these seven verses - their participation in the religious service of the day. He gives us, in verses 1-3, some negatives and then some positives before taking us to the conclusion in verses 4-7.

So let's read the first three verses. We'll look at the negatives first and then the positives. We should get the negatives out of the way.

Here's what he said, verse 1, "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. 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. For a dream comes through much activity, and a fool's voice is known by his many words." So Solomon watches, and he warns, first of all, that there is a way to come to church where you come to bring the sacrifice of fools, and you're not aware that what you're doing is evil. It is clear that Solomon had watched some attend the Temple in a very mechanical way. You know, any spiritual activity that you take on that degenerates to the level of mechanical is really not acceptable to God - when you go through things out of habit. No church involvement as far as your heart is concerned, but "It is just the way we've always done it. We're a very religious family. We're always in church." But that doesn't mean anything - really. Mechanical worship loses its meaning to God because you're not engaged with Him. You're just going through the motions. It loses its benefit to you. And Solomon has a few things to say about this negative side of worship. He calls their participation a "sacrifice of fools." Literally, people are coming to bring something, but they don't know why. They're really not engaged in it. And, in

essence, what they're doing is evil in God's sight, though they are unaware of it. There are certainly lots of folks who find themselves in a formalized relationship with God - oftentimes thinking that their participation in outward religious behavior can substitute for a life of fellowship with God. I talked to a fellow the other day, and he's a religious guy but he definitely isn't a saved guy, and I said, "Well, what do you know about God?" And he said, "Look, I love God. I have been baptized. I have taken communion. We're a very religious family." I said, "Yeah, what you've told me is you're doing a lot of things. Tell me about God." And he was angry, which I bring out in a lot of people apparently. I don't know. (Laughing) But it was all about the ritual for him. It had nothing to do with a relationship with God.

Well, look, the Temple sacrifices that Solomon was watching - they were instituted by God, they were commanded to the people by the Lord with very detailed instruction, much of which had to do with the sacrifice of the blood that is shed for the covering of man's sin as a type and a picture of what Jesus, the Lamb of God, would come to do. And it had to do with learning God's holiness and man's sinfulness. But they were given with great directives. However, God never once, in any place in the Bible, intended the people to practice those sacrifices as stand-alone activities or actions without their heart being involved. In other words, if they weren't intimately involved with what they were bringing and realizing the benefit personally, to the Lord, it wasn't acceptable. It was just an action without a heart. There was no identification of the worshiper with his God. And ritual, unfortunately, will do that. Religious practices can cover very wicked hearts. You remember when Cain came at a time when the Lord demanded worship, and Cain brought his offering which God rejected. And it says there in Genesis 4:5 that "Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell." What is this? And the Lord basically said to him in Genesis 4:6-7, "Why are you looking so downcast? If you do the right things, you'll be accepted." God immediately placed His finger on the problem with Cain. "If you lived it, your offering would be accepted. But you're not living it, you're just going through the motions. You cover your sinful ways with an outward show."

When Saul was sent to destroy the Amalekites (1 Samuel 15), by Samuel, and the Lord said, "I don't want anything that moves to be alive when I get there," the blind prophet came, in his old age, to Saul, and he said, "How are things going?" And Saul said, "Oh, we're serving the Lord, man." And Samuel said, "Well, man, I still hear a lot of bleating of sheep in my ear." And Saul said, "Yeah, we're going to

save that to give to the Lord. That's the best stuff. We're going to give it to Him." And it was Samuel who said to this wicked king, "To obey is better than sacrifice" (1 Samuel 15:22). The ritual wouldn't cut it, it wasn't covering it, it wasn't where God wanted the person to be. He said, "Well, wait a minute. God gave us those things to do." He did, but He called you to Himself through those things.

In Isaiah 1:10-18, Isaiah, in being sent by the Lord to that nation, said this, **now the Lord sent you on a mission, and he said this**, "Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom; give ear to the law of our God, you people of Gomorrah:" and then he says this, " 'To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices to Me?' says the LORD. 'I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed cattle. I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs or goats. When you come to appear before Me, who has required this from your hand, to trample My courts? Bring no more futile sacrifices; incense is an abomination to Me. The New Moons, the Sabbaths, and the calling of assemblies - I cannot endure iniquity and the sacred meeting. Your New Moons and your appointed feasts My soul hates; they are a trouble to Me, I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands, I will hide My eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not hear. Your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes. Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rebuke the oppressor; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow. Come now, and let us reason together,' says the LORD. 'Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool.' " The Lord said very clearly to the people, "Hey, you're going through the religious motions. I hate it!" Well, we would hate it, wouldn't we? You get a card and a birthday present from somebody that's been mistreating you your whole life - "Here you go!" "Yeah, I'm impressed." Because you know what they're like. Well, so the Lord. God never separates the worshiper from his worship, and He is never impressed with pageantry that covers up a heart of wickedness. In any form of worship, if your heart is not there, God is not there either. And man might be fooled as he watches you from the sidelines - bowing and apparent devotion and sincerity - but God sees what man can't. God sees the heart.

Verse 1 says you can fool yourself even though what you're doing is wicked. You can raise your hands in song while making a grocery list in your head. You can mouth the words and make the list. Not good. Certainly not acceptable. Outwardly so holy; inwardly not so much. And Solomon calls it the "sacrifice of fools" - those who draw near to God externally while evil grips their heart. They don't come to

hear from God. They come to cover up their lack of hearing from God - with faking through some sacrifices. And Solomon says, "That's foolish, man. That's evil." Whether you know it or not, it's evil.

Another point that Solomon marked about the negative side of coming is how carelessly people come to pray - that it had degenerated, not into a fellowship with God but into just careless or kind of formal speaking. "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." He's God, you're not. "Therefore let your words be few." And then he says in verse 3, "You can dream at night because you've been so busy during the day. Well a fool, you can know him too. He talks a lot," and he brings it into his prayer life. Prayer prayed without thinking, vows made with no awareness of what is being said - rash with our mouth, hasty before God. Again, mindless activity that doesn't consider God and you. Not personally engaged with words, prayers are kind of like mindless chatter, you know? Much speaking, hoping to be heard. You can, like I said, sing that way too. You might have sung this morning every word, but were you engaged with worshipping the Lord? Is it He that you were singing to, or were you just singing? Because this is what we do before the pastor talks. Are you aware who you're speaking to, singing to? Are you aware of who you are? Or is that whole process detached from a relationship with Him? He's in heaven, you're on the earth, and yet you have no reverence in your heart and no seriousness. You're not aware that it is for His purpose we gather. Those are foolish ways in a congregation.

So they fill their prayers with too many words like a busy schedule produces dreaming at night of an overly-occupied mind. A lot of folks like that. They pray with lots of words, but it's kind of flowery. It's empty eloquence. It's meant to impress. I don't know if you've ever been asked to pray publicly, but it's interesting the temptation that you will have is to think about how you're praying in terms of how people hear you. "I wonder if they'll think I'm spiritual when I'm done. I'll use some really spiritual words. Oooh, Loord. There, that'll help it. Dear Good." (Laughing) But you're only talking to the Lord, you're not impressing the crowd. We're so concerned with wanting to sound good, be thought of as spiritual. Jesus said of that Pharisee who came into the Temple there in Luke 18 and said in verse 11, "Father, thank You that I am not like this other guy, this sinner over here," and Jesus said, "This guy prayed with himself." His prayer went like four feet off the ground and slapped him right back on the head coming down. Never made heaven, never got to God's ears. Why? Because he liked to hear himself pray. Jesus said

in the Sermon on the Mount, your prayers should be private and thoughtful and only for God's ears, who already knows your needs before you ask - so you can come reverently and you don't have to talk a big game, you can just realize who He is and who you are.

Well, look, by the time that the sacrifices were in full force at the Temple, there were a lot of things that contributed to the formalization of praying. For one thing, they began to pray institutionally or formatted prayers - prayers that were repeated and read without any kind of a free flow, if you will, of fellowship between God and the one praying. So, we've used the example - if you meet someone, you wouldn't pull out a card and look at it and say, "Good morning, how are you" and then wait for them to answer and then read to them. It's silly. But yet, you'll see that sometimes in churches or political events where the religious guy will show up to pray, and he'll read. Right? "I'm gonna read a prayer." God could care less. If you know the Lord, speak to Him. If you don't, just don't show up for this. Right? What are you doing there? So, prayers had become formalized. The Jews, every morning, had to pray the Shema, right? The Deuteronomy 6:4, "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one!" And there were many other prayers that the devout or the pious would pray and sing each day. It isn't hard to see how your prayers or your singing can become an activity without an engaged heart. You let the hose run, you know? The water's just coming out, but you're somewhere else. You can worship that way. You can certainly sit in church that way. We are good at habitually practicing things, aren't we? We are. So, be careful....because Solomon, in watching, said, "You know, these folks just come in with these very formalized, institutionalized kind of prayers."

Secondly, in Solomon's day, prayer was set at times and places so that - that isn't necessarily a bad thing. It keeps you on a schedule, it keeps you regular, if you will, and habitual. However, they can also work against you when people begin to say to you, "Prayer is good at any time in any place, but it's better if it's here at 6:00 a.m., and noon, and 6:00 p.m. here And it's better in Jerusalem at the Temple than it is in the streets of Jericho." Well, that's not true. If you go to Israel with us, somewhere, someplace, some Jewish man or woman is going to say to you, "Did you know that prayer from here is a local call?" It's like the running joke, you know? "We're closer to God - we're in Jerusalem." That's not true. Whittier's not a toll call. But we find that whole issue of time and place becomes an issue that so often can make your prayer life habitual rather than fellowship-driven. There are, and there were in Solomon's days as well, in a lot of churches today - they have

prescribed prayers for every occasion. "The birth of the baby, we pray this prayer. In emergencies, we pray this prayer. The burial, we have to say this prayer. We've got to bring that prayer out." And there is this formalized, kind of institutionalized, way of praying. Now, I'm sure that it started off with good intentions. "Oh, the Lord spoke today. I wrote this down. It was such a ministering. It helped us." But six generations later, we're just reading something. God hasn't spoken at all. So it's degenerated into this mechanical reading of prayer to God from mouths that have no interest at all in God whatsoever.

And finally, from what we read in the Scriptures, there was an understanding - like there is in many churches today, religions today - that length equals effectiveness; that the louder you bang and the longer you bang on the doors of heaven, the more likely you are to hear from God. So prayers, over history, eventually began to lengthen - not for any other reason than this concept that if I keep talking, maybe He'll listen. Well there's no truth to that, but you can see the adding. If you watch prayers over history, that have been recorded, you'll find that as you get further and further away from the Lord's work, you'll find these flowery developed kind of prayers that throw a lot of adjectives in. It isn't "Oh God" anymore, it's "Oh magnificent, holy and all-powerful and knowledgeable and able and most blessed One whoever existed." Just say, "God," we're all right. But we've got to add to the prayer, you know, we've got to make it long. And it's still true in some circles today. You'll find folks that just - it's flowery and it's long, but it isn't effective. Jesus said in Matthew 6:5, "The hypocrites love to stand in the streets and just pray - where everybody notices." Maybe you've noticed that some people, when they pray, they have a prayer sound. Their voices change. Pastors are oftentimes, I think, guilty of that. Right? Their voice changes. Sometimes they take on a southern accent, you know? (Laughing) "Worked for Billy, it can work for you all as well. So come-a to the church-a, aye, aye, aye-a." (Laughing) Try ordering pancakes like that at the IHOP. They'll throw you out. Look, the whole idea is God's not impressed with that. That's not relation with God. That's not fellowship with God. The ancients used to pray with mesmerizing repetition of phrases. When Elijah confronted the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 18, he said, "You go first. Call on your gods, see if they'll fire up the offering." And they prayed for hours. They cut themselves. Elijah mocked them. "Maybe he's in the bathroom," he writes. "Indisposed. Maybe he's on vacation. Maybe he's far away - you'll have to yell a little louder." And they got crazier as they went. And in the time of the evening sacrifice, Elijah stepped up, and in two short little sentences said, "Lord, make Yourself known." His words were few. He knew his God. God worked.

I heard a story of a young boy who was in church, and he was sitting near the front where the pastor could see him, and his head was bowed during the whole time of prayer, and his lips were moving like he was really praying. His arms were raised, and every once in a while, out of his mouth would come the words, "Tokyo, Tokyo." And the pastor said, "Man, I gotta see what's going on with this kid." So, after the service he called him over, and he said, "Man, I just love to see you pray. Man, you're a fervent prayer. What's with the Tokyo, Tokyo?" And the little boy said, "Well, Friday I took a geography test, and I need a good grade to pass. So I'm asking God over and over to make the capital of France - Tokyo, Tokyo." Well, that won't work. Maybe you can get that done with your parents by asking a lot. God's not going to do that. But it's easy for us, who love the Lord, to fall into ruts when it comes to prayer - to use familiar phrases or overly use kind of dusty ones. Think about how you pray over food. It's so easy to rattle them off. But prayer was meant to express your heart before God. David said, "Pour out your heart before the Lord" (Psalm 62:8).

So the negatives to Solomon, is he watched where this **mechanicalized** worship that was formalized, written, prescribed, lengthy prayers - designed to impress.

Well, here's what he says positively in verse 1, "Walk prudently when you go to the house of God." In modern terms - be careful when you go church. Watch your step. For even something as beneficial and as needful and as commanded by the Lord as church attendance and involvement can become dangerous, and here's why. In church, we handle spiritual truth. Right? We spend time being confronted by God's Word. If you take that in and put that away and don't allow it to become a part of your life, it isn't long before you develop a heart where you can hear what should convict your heart, but it no longer does because you've been bullet-proof for a long time. And so it becomes stale to you. There's no life involved in it. It's much like the day-old manna - you can't eat it. If you don't apply, but resist, the truth over time, your heart will harden, and the sermons which ought to touch your heart will not. Walk prudently. In other words, come to church prepared. What did you do to prepare yourself for coming this morning? What is needed? I know that you prepared yourself outwardly. All of you stood in the mirror and went, "Pants, check. Shirt, check." You wiped the syrup from the corner of your mouth, you got the sleep out of your eyes, you put clothes on that you will be willing to be seen in public with. You are outwardly prepared. But what about inwardly prepared? Did you pray at all? "Lord, I'm going to church this morning. Speak to me. I need to hear from you. I want to spend this next hour letting You speak to

my heart." Did you come intent on listening? Were you here on time? Because you want to be on time. You're meeting with the Lord, with His people. Are you sitting somewhere where you're not distracted? Where you can concentrate on what the Lord is wanting to say? Did you bring a Bible with you, or are you just using ours? You shouldn't write in ours, (Laughing) but you should write in yours. Did you bring a pen with you, or a piece of paper or a notepad, so if the Lord speaks, you'll be able to remember what He said? Did you come prudently? Seriously, carefully, expectantly? Do you really do that, or is it just, "Well, I go to second service. That's my service. And I sit in the same place, and I do the same thing, I sit with the same people, I talk to the same folks, I park in the same spot."

You know, young Solomon might have been different. But older Solomon saw it much clearer. Amazing.

Samuel was a young boy when, staying in the place with the high priest (1 Samuel 3), he had the Lord call his name, and he didn't know it was the Lord. And he went and told Eli, "I keep hearing this voice calling my name," and Eli said, "That's the Lord, man. You're hearing God's voice. Next time He speaks, you say, 'Yes, Lord. Your servant hears. Speak to me.'" Be prudent as you go to church.

Second of all, notice that it says in verse 1, "draw near to hear rather than to give the sacrifice of fools." In other words, do you come to church to hear from God? The New Living Translation is interestingly translated these words, "Keep your ears open and your mouth shut." That's a new way to look at it, but indeed, James would say (1:19) we should be "swift to hear and slow to speak." Do you plan, when you come to church, to listen to what God has to say? You can worship God by paying attention to what He wants to tell you. If God is speaking, then you will honor Him by turning everything else off and listening intently to His voice. It's of great value to you and me that we gather together to hear from God - not to look around to see who's here or who's not, not to spend the first twenty minutes of church service visiting with your friends in the foyer. That's disrespectful to the work of God. You want to give Him priority as you would anyone that you care about. Come prudently. Come to hear. Let God speak.

When Nehemiah and Ezra brought that revival there in Nehemiah 8, you find the people all gathered together, standing to hear God's Word - intently hearing what God had to say and leaving, doing that which they heard. God still speaks today - just as when He breaks the bread of His Word, we're fed. Draw near to hear.

When Paul wrote to the Hebrews in chapter 4:12, he said that "the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart." So God knows what He's up to with His Word. In fact, the word there "laid open" - we are all laid open before the One with which we have to do - is the Greek word for "trachea" and comes from the practice of a priest pulling the head of an animal out of the way and plunging his knife into his throat - to bleed the animal for the sacrifice. If you want to put it in modern terms, God's Word goes for the jugular. He intends to go after us. He intends to pierce. And I don't know if you've ever heard a sermon that hit you right between the eyes, but it can hurt, can't it? You just go, "Oh, I didn't like that. I liked it, but I didn't like it." I've had people say to me, "Did someone call you and tell you what my situation was?" Well, of course not. But God knew, and His Word put His hand right upon that which you were going through. God wants to touch us. Every sermon should comfort the afflicted, but it should also afflict the comfortable. God still speaks if we're willing to listen.

I had a fellow say to me one time, "You know, when I get to church, somehow I'm clearly attentive on my days calendar and my worries. About the time the service starts, my mind is absolutely engaged with something else." Well, then come to hear, and be prudent.

He goes on, as he talks about the response to what we hear in verse 4, "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 - better not to vow than to vow and not pay. 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? For in the multitude of dreams and many words there is also vanity. But fear God." The worshiper hears God's Word, and he promises many things. The Lord speaks to you. "Oh, I haven't been praying like I should. Oh, I haven't been walking like I should. Oh, I should really forgive that person I'm so angry with. Oh, I really do need to deal with this sin in my life. God, I'm going to do it!" And we believe it, and we say it - until we hit the back door. And then the sunshine hits. "Oh, phew! That was close. I almost got converted. Whoo!" (Laughing) Got away. How many forgotten words have been uttered in this age of shortened covenants and micro vows? "I made a vow." But what we should be doing is, when God speaks to us, clenching that to heart and making it our own and thanking the Lord for speaking to us.

Jesus, when He washed the feet of the disciples there in John 13:17, ended by saying, "If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them." "To whom much is given, much is required" (Luke 12:48). But you consider some of the vows you've made before God that you haven't kept. "Oh, Lord, You're my Savior. You're My Lord. I want to witness for You. I want to serve You. I just want to be interested in what You're interested in. I'm going to follow You. I'm going to tell others about You. I'm going to serve You with all that I have."

Pastor Chuck and I did a wedding for a couple that were both mutual friends of ours, and we were talking to the couple about vows because they had written the longest vows I've ever read, actually. And I'm thinking, "You're just getting yourself in trouble here, reading all these out loud." (Laughing) But, it was beautiful. But I said to the couple, "You know, God takes these seriously. You're not just kidding around here. This isn't like you're fooling your parents. This is - you're talking to the Lord. This is before God." So take it seriously because God doesn't take any pleasure in the fool. Who's the fool? The guy with lots of words who won't do what he says.

So, verses 5 and 6 speak to the commitment and our failure to keep his word. The religious man will separate his heart from his promises. Vows in the Bible are never mandatory. There's not one place where you have to make a vow. Nowhere does God say, "Swear to God." (Laughing) No shotgun vows. But, if you're going to make a promise to the Lord because God's speaking to your heart, then do all that you can to keep it. And don't just make it until the storm passes and then say, as he says here, "You say to the messenger of God, 'Nah, that's not what I meant. What I meant was I'm gonna do better. I'm gonna try. Hey, dude, don't put my feet in the fire.'" And then he said, "Why should God be angry with you for your foolishness" for excusing yourself? Then you may end up fighting with God. You don't want to redefine the terms or explain what you really meant. God knows what you really meant. And if you're going to raise your vow to the level of involving God, then take it seriously. In fact, he ends by saying, you should just "fear God."

You know, ultimately, that's what this is all about, isn't it? We gather together in God's house. Notice we read there that we enter into the house of God. So, verse 1, when you go into the house of God - it doesn't say into the church building, which it is. It doesn't say into the Temple. It says the house of God, the place God is. And when you and I gather together here as God's people, God is here, uniquely so, amongst His people. So when you come in, you better fear the Lord. You better

realize that it's Him that you're serving. And ultimately, worship is a relationship with God based on the fear or the reverence of the Lord. He's worth worshipping. He's worth listening to. He's worth hearing from. He's the One that's gotta speak, and I've gotta hear Him. And the reason worship becomes mechanical and prayers become formalized is that we lose fear of the Lord. He just disappears out of the picture, and I'm left with a case without a person attached to it.

So often people come to church, and it's all about them rather than about God. It's awfully wrong. I have, honestly, watched people come in who sit in the same place every week - like most of you - but someone beat them to it, or they're new, and they get about three-quarters of the way to their seats, and they go, (Laughing) "There's someone in my seat!" (Laughing) Really? That's your seat now? "I'm there every week!" You look on the ground, there'll be some sunflower seeds there somewhere. "Those are mine!" (Laughing) You really don't want me to know whether you made it Sunday or not - move around. "It's my parking space. I park there every week. I back right in. That's my place. People should know that's mine!" "I talked to Pastor Gerard, and he didn't sing the song I suggested. I don't know why not. I love that song!" "Pastor, your sermon's going a little longer these days. Maybe you could hurry it along!" It's all about me, me, me. I come to church for me.

But you gotta come to church for Him. For the fear of the Lord. We should rather come to hear from God and respond in promise, and as God speaks to us, we seek after Him. The word "fear" means "to respect" or "to be reverent of." God is deserving. God is good. God is in that place - we should give Him that understanding. Paul said to the Romans in chapter 3:18 - of the world - "There is no fear of God before their eyes." That's the way the world treats God, not the church.

Solomon, as he wrote Proverbs, wrote in chapter 1:7 that "the fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge." Eight chapters later, in Proverbs 9:10, he said, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding." He uses it twenty-eight or twenty-nine times to speak of that hunger that we should have for the Lord.

Solomon has been looking at life on the horizontal, lived selfishly, plane. He's found it to be frustrating and empty and lifeless. He sees the same thing carrying over into spiritual lives of some. But our vertical life should be different. We have a

relationship with God. And the degeneration from walking prudently in spiritual things and having our prayers then become mechanical is almost a natural process because we do sit in the same place, we do gather with the same people, we do have service at the same time, we do often park where we normally park. There's a lot that's just habitual. But our relationship with God better not be. It'll be our downfall. We'll be fools in doing evil in the sight of God and not even aware of it. We need to guard against it and be cognizant of it, and head it off at every turn and not lose the fear of God.

I talked to a fellow a while back, a farmer who lived on a country road that really no one ever used. And one day, his six-year-old boy was riding a bicycle out, and because there was never anybody on it, he didn't look, he just ran across the road. And a car was coming down the road to sell some fertilizer, and it hit this boy on his bike and killed him. He was six years old. So his dad took his mangled bike, and he mounted it over the door of his barn. He had to go in there every day to feed his livestock and all, and one of his sons said to him a couple of months later, "Dad, why is that there?" He said, "I never want to forget your brother."

Well, I think that's pretty much the way it should work for us. Jesus died so you could know Him. You shouldn't forget it just because you're here every week. Like the mangled bike - put the cross at the forefront of what you see. You can fear God. You'll never lose sight of His worthiness, then, and of His holiness. It may make you weep every time you consider it, but that's all right. We have to guard ourselves from the formality of what we do - no matter how non-denominational we are. And we have to commit ourselves to consistently letting our relationship with God be the priority. You're not here for you. You're here for Him. He's here for you.

Submitted by Maureen Dickson
July 2, 2013