

Reverence in worship

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Preacher: Rev Murdo Alex Macleod

[0 : 00] Let us turn now to the book of Ecclesiastes chapter 5 and the first verse.

Ecclesiastes chapter 5 verse 1. Keep thy fruit when thou goest to the house of God, and be more ready to hear than to give the sacrifice of fools, for they consider not that they do evil.

Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter anything before God. For God is in heaven, and thou upon earth, therefore let thy words be few.

And so on, down to verse 7. And let's see the connection that exists between the passage we have here and the teaching of the whole book of Ecclesiastes.

We have seen in the past few weeks that the writer here is on the lookout, as it were, for the kind of life that is worth living.

[1 : 22] The life that has meaning and substance to it. And we know that his conclusion is this, that the kind of life that is commendable, the only life that is commendable in the light of eternity, is the life that is the life that is lived with reference to God.

The life in which God is honoured, or God is feared, God is obeyed, and God is loved. Now, he has come to this conclusion as a result of considerable search on his own part and on the part of others. He has looked at life from so many angles, as it is lived by so many people, as it has its emphasis in so many directions.

And his conclusion is that life, apart from the one of which God is at the centre, is vanity. It is understandable, therefore, how the question should arise in his mind, and arise in the minds of those who study this book.

How then am I to live? The answer we saw last week was, from chapter 4, was that what you have to do really is to get God into your life, into the relationships that you form in life.

[2 : 58] Get him as the third dimension in all your relationships, so that you have then a threefold cord that cannot be easily broken. Now that, he says, is the life that is worth living, the life in which God is at the centre, God is in control, and God is honoured.

God is in control, and God is in control, and God is in control, and God is in control. And, if that be the case, God being there is necessarily then going to influence me in all that I do, wherever I go. And, it is that aspect of this life that he now deals with here in chapter 5, with particular reference to the way in which a person worships.

Here he is now, and he's living a life with reference to God. He's bringing God into things, into everything. And this God answers the question that is posed more than once in the Old Testament, and in the New, how am I to worship God?

One of the great questions, for example, in the Old Testament, in the book of the prophet Micah, was this, he put another way, was, what shall I come into the presence of God?

[4 : 22] What am I to offer God? How am I to worship Him? Now that's a very important question, because worship forms a very important part of the life of man.

You know that one of the great theological debates over the centuries has centred around the question of the image, around this issue, the image of God in man.

Now we in the Reformed churches believe that when man sinned, he lost the image of God.

But we have to define that. We have to define what we mean. By losing the image of God, what we mean is this. He lost his holiness, he lost his righteousness, and he lost his knowledge of the living and the true God.

He doesn't know, savingly, God at all. But, you have to be careful. Though the image of God was lost in man, man didn't cease to be man.

[5 : 40] And God made man a creature who worships, and who wants to worship, and who must worship. And that is why throughout the world tonight, you have people engaging in worship.

It may be that they are not worshipping the God that you and I worship. It may be that they are not worshipping the way that you and I are worshipping, but they are nevertheless worshipping. There are people tonight who have never heard of the Bible, never seen a church, who are filled with fear because of their sense of someone, somewhere, something out with themselves. and to express their worship, they bow down before a piece of wood, maybe a piece of stone. They will go to great lengths to offer something to something, someone, someone, as a sop to their conscience.

You see, man is a worshipping creature. He doesn't, of course, worship the living God the way he ought to until God enlightens his mind as the New Testament tells us in the knowledge of himself. [6 : 55] So you see, it's an important question for man, for every man. How am I to worship? Now for us who have a Bible, it's an equally important question. But the Bible answers the question.

It tells us how we are to conduct ourselves in the presence of God. It tells us the spirit in which we are to come to God's house.

It tells us how we are to conduct ourselves in the house of God. It tells us how we are to sing his praises. How we are to pray. It tells us how we are to think.

It tells us to exercise caution when we come to making promises. Or as this passage tells us, making vows. And so on. So that's what this passage deals with. It tells us how we are to worship. Now you and I are here tonight. Ostensibly worshipping God. Very well then. What does this passage have to tell us about the spirit in which we worship?

[8 : 03] And it tells us this, keep thy fruit when thou goest the house of God. Here is a picture of a man on the way to church. And he's told to keep his fruit.

Now we'll see in a minute what that, what these words, what that expression means. Keep your fruit as you go to worship. And then as you follow through the passage you find the man is now inside the church.

He is actually engaged in the, he's engaged in the act of worship. and he's told now how he is to listen. Be more ready to hear than to give the sacrifice of fools for they consider not that they do evil.

Here he is now and he's sitting down and his ears are open. At least they ought to be. And he's told about the spirit in which he is to listen. And then thirdly in chapter 2 he is told what to do as he prays.

Be not rash with thy mouth. You see it's in the context of worship. And it not thy heart be hasty to utter anything before God for God is in heaven and thou art on earth therefore let thy words be few.

[9 : 11] Now the man is praying in church and here are guidelines for prayer. What he's saying is just be very careful what you pray for.

And he equates the prayers of people with the dreams of the busy man in verse 3 a dream come through the multitude of business and a fool's voice is known by multitude of words. You see here's a picture of a man who's terribly busy through the day.

Business projects running through his mind and he goes to bed at night and he dreams and his mind doesn't seem to be at rest even as he sleeps. It's full of you know the way you get up in the morning and say well I dreamt what a lot of rubbish that dream was.

And it doesn't seem there doesn't seem to be any connection between the worst of the day and the dream of the night. This is the point he's making that here's a man worshipping and he's praying and there doesn't seem to be any connection between the prayers the words that he had present to the almighty and what he should be really praying for.

So he says be careful how you pray. And then finally he deals with a very important thing in the context of worship vows. Now of course this used to be an important thing in worship in the Old Testament time but we don't make vows today as they used to.

[10 : 30] What we make today are promises covenant engagements. We promise God certain things and what we're told here is this be careful that when you promise God a thing that you're prepared to fulfill it.

That's the point he's making in verses 4 to 7. So the three things that he's did with here are these our attitude as we go to worship our attitude as we sit at worship with reference to our listening to our prayers and to our promises.

Let us then look at them in turn and apply it to our own situation here tonight. The spirit in which we go. That's being said by someone that the target here is the well-meaning person who likes a good

thing and he turns up cheerfully enough to church but he listens with half an ear and never quite gets round to what he has volunteered to do for God.

Such a man he says has forgotten where he is, who he is and above all he's forgotten what God is. Now the advice to that person and to us all is this keep thy foot.

And the meaning of these words is just this remember where you're going. As you go to worship remember where you're going.

[12:00] Now that means this that we are to prepare for worship before we come to it. Before we even leave our house we should prepare for coming to the house of God.

We are we are to come with care with thoughtfulness with seriousness with earnestness because the Bible devotes considerable care and attention to this part of man's life.

His worship in the presence of God. We open our service here tonight with one of these great songs of worship. All people that on earth do dwell come to the Lord with cheerful voice.

himself said with mercy his praise foretell come ye before him and rejoice. And I couldn't help but thinking during that first singing here tonight which I felt was a tremendous part of the service.

If only we could bring that spirit which seemed well at least the outward the spirit that seemed to be there outwardly. If only we could bring that into every aspect of our worship. If only we could put our heart into it like we put into the singing here tonight how different our public worship would be.

[13:24] How different. And then how different our worship would be if we were to think more about it. To put more thought into it than we do.

Maybe my friend it may apply to you. It may be. It may. If it does if the Catholics wear it. Maybe you never thought of where you were coming tonight till you sat in this house and maybe you haven't even thought of it since then.

Till these words bring it before you. There is one classic example in the Old Testament I want to speak to you about for a minute which throws light on this and you all know about it in the book of Exodus.

When Moses was out there on Mount Horeb and he saw this wonderful sight I think it's in chapter 3 the burning bush and he threw near to behold this sight.

And you remember what God said to him. Put off thy shoes from off thy feet for the ground on which thou standest is holy. Now the outward act of putting the shoes off an outward act which is practiced in some worship to this day and particularly in the east before they enter a place of worship.

[14:41] they put off their shoes roughly the same way as a man come to church with a hat and before he opens and enters the door he puts off his hat. The outward act of putting off the shoes was the symbol of reverence and of awe in the presence of God.

Now what he's saying here is this. Bring more of that attitude into your life as you come to the house of God. And has this not got something to say to you and to me?

Surely it has that we should give more time to preparing our hearts for coming to the house of God. we give so much time for preparing ourselves outwardly the way we appear in coming to church.

Do we ever consider the inward attitude of mind and heart to the things of God? That's the question. And that's what this passage which is finger on.

And it asks this question, how are we in our relationship to God with reverence to our worship? Did we think of it before we left the house? Did we pray about it?

[16:02] Did we ask for his blessing here? For his presence to be made known? In this place of worship? Did we think about that? Did we speak about that?

As we came to church? Now there's one other thing I want to mention here. I mentioned already but I want to say this about it. Our appearance.

Our often appearance in coming to church. Some people say that it's not important. Well I disagree with them. I believe it is profoundly important how we appear outwardly in the presence of the living God.

Because right throughout the Bible you have this emphasis from God himself that coming into his presence in worship is a tremendously important thing. It's vitally important.

And it is to that approach to him that there is this awe, this reverence, this solemnity attached. It was God who attached it to it. Not me and anybody else.

[17:05] When God says that I am to give due consideration to the way in which I come, to my appearance as I come, to the spirit in which I come, then I disregard what God says at my peril.

And I'm going to say this to the young people here tonight, I've said it before, and I delight in saying it because I know that there are some men who cannot say it. No young person in this congregation has ever at a weak service or a Sabbath service given me cause for concern about their appearance outwardly as they come into the presence of the living God.

And I wouldn't like to see the day in this congregation when that changes. I don't think it is a mask of humility nor a mask of liberty and Christian worship to come to church dressed in a slovenly and casual way.

I don't think it's a mask of humility or of liberty. I think it's an evidence of ignorance of the holiness of the living God and an evidence of lack of respect for him and for his word.

You see coming to church dressed the way you and I are dressed tonight there's no way in which we want to honor God isn't the product of tradition alone.

[18:47] it is the product of a tradition which is based firmly upon an acceptance of and a love to and a regard and an honor for the word of the living God.

That's what it's based on. Not upon what so and so says or so and so thinks but what God tells me from his word. I think I told you before about an incident that occurred once.

A young fellow whom I knew very well a very fine young man he was in many respects and I remember meeting him once on the street in a particular town very well nicely dressed and I spoke to him he was a Christian boy and it so happened that I was in a prayer meeting in the same place that night same place you know I knew he fell off my seat and I saw that same fellow coming in I'd just met him downtown two hours before very well turned out here he was and he walks into this prayer meeting and it wasn't that I know fine that there are people many people in the world tonight who don't have the wherewithal to attire themselves in a way that you and I would like to see people attire to come to church I'm not talking about that kind of situation talking about the situation which here was a man who was very well turned out two hours previously and now he walks into a public worship public meeting of worship worshipping the living

God slovenly turned out almost deliberately defined convention well as I said earlier that's not humility and it certainly isn't common sense and it isn't either the fruit of the spirit of God it is the product of the flesh therefore says the word of God be careful how you come inwardly and outwardly and let the first priority in my life be this how does God want me to appear as you go then to church from now on let this become an important question in your thinking help me to come in the right way help me to think about the right things and may I ever keep before my mind that I am coming into the presence of almighty

God and when you leave this place you young people when you leave this congregation you leave this town you who follow young people have left this congregation who have been a credit to their homes and a credit to their congregation over the years and you leave with them make sure that wherever you are and whenever you go to worship you remember that you are worshipping North Nirmans or Glasgow or Edinburgh or Edinburgh or wherever you are worshipping the living God wherever he places you and you honour him you honour him whatever other people may think or may see of your appearance remember that but secondly remember this as well it's important how you hear and be more ready to hear when you come to the house of God than to give the sacrifice of fools for they consider not that they do evil now here's this passion in worship and he's sitting down now this is very important he's got to use his ear he's got to use his ear and the thing here is that he has to be of a teachable disposition he has to give attention to what is being said to him in the church he's hearing so as to obey now it so happens that in our church and in the reformed churches the emphasis in every act of worship is on in public worship is on the preaching of the gospel you see there are some people who say that they well not only say but to practice that preaching isn't very important you know that in a lot of services at night preaching doesn't take more than ten minutes fifteen minutes fifteen minutes that's the maximum and if you say to people who aren't used to the form of worship that you and I have and if you say that oh well he preaches for thirty five forty forty five minutes fifty minutes some people preach for an hour an hour that seems absolutely ridiculous and what's happened in the churches throughout the world is that the emphasis has been shifted from preaching to ritual and preaching except for a very little part and yet when you see worship conducted as we have a picture of it throughout the bible what's central teaching revealing the mind and the will of god bring before people what god says what god demands therefore as you and I sit and worship remember the importance of the ear and what are we listening to listen to the psalmist what he says

[24 : 24] I'll hear what god the lord will speak it so happens that the lord uses people like me and others to communicate his mind and his will to people so it's important that you listen how am I to listen listen so that I can obey so that I will do what the world tells me to do of course there are lots of people sit in church and they don't listen at all or you think they might give you the impression that some people are good at giving impressions that they're living others aren't that they're listening others aren't very good at at all they don't seem to bother and so the great question for some people is when they're going to get out almost from the time they come in and say from the time the text has given out and I'm not talking about children just who have a habit of looking at their watches but there are some others who have a habit of looking at their watches you see they're finding things so long so they're not listening just listening for let us pray there are people who find a habit if they keep awake in church or they're awake all day perhaps a good part of the night so a church is a good place to have a trip as it were they're not listening they come to church just for a comfortable sit and if it's warm soap here and it's easy to know dogs they don't listen to our word other people yawn their way through ourselves and other people come to church to eat sweets and for various reasons but they don't come to listen listening for what listening for the obedience of faith why does

God speak to you unto me here tonight what's he saying to you supremely he's saying believe in the Lord Jesus and be saved that's the message that's the teaching that's what he says are we listening listening to obey is it not through my friend that even though you may come to church with a bible that you may be coming here and have come here just to review your yesterdays or to plan for tomorrow how often do you sit in church like that I challenge you putting right the mistake for the past few days perhaps looking forward to Monday Tuesday is it Friday is it Saturday and all the time that you're sitting and you're hearing this voice that were coming from a vast distance to your mind is full of these things that you should have left outside that door and your ears aren't open at all here's advice for you from the bible be more ready to hear than to give the sacrifice of fools what is the sacrifice of fools well the thing that

I'm talking about you see the person is coming to worship to offer and the sacrifice of the fool is this the fool is the man who has no reference to God do you remember what the bible says about the fool he doesn't think about eternity he doesn't bring God into his life the fool in the book of Ecclesiastes is a man in whose life God is not and here he is sitting in church he's worshipping God isn't with him he's not thinking about God he's not listening to God and he's not wanting God well that is not the way in which we are to listen the truth as someone put it floats across a multitude of hearers but no profitable impression is left all is absolutely worthless a mockery of God and you know it's really a solemn thought when you think about it the number of times that you've been to church and you've sat supposed to be listening and not a single word of what was said perhaps in the course of a 45 minute address have you carried with you outside to that pavement your ears weren't open for God your mind was filled with other things even as you sat even as you sat in the house of God you know what God said about some Old

Testament worshippers this people he said draw near to me with their lips but their hearts are far off is that you there's a third element here prayer I just deal with it very briefly very important be not rash with thy mouth verse 2 and let not thine heart be hasty to utter anything before God for God is in heaven now upon earth therefore let thy words be few now just very briefly this you know that I'm sure that from time to time each one of us here has prayed somewhere for some reason or other now here's this man sitting in church and he's praying maybe you haven't prayed here tonight well you know you can do it this very minute as you're sitting there

I would like to challenge someone here tonight would you pray just now as you sit in this church that God would bless your soul I know that there may be people present who wouldn't do it not for the life of them too proud to do that too proud how will my friend just try and stand on your pride for a second and pray that God would bless you now you're not being hasty doing that you're not being rash you see being hasty and being rash means this praying for things that you have no right to pray for you see something crosses your mind God give me that that's being rash you think you hear of someone who's gone saying Lord I would love to go there that's being hasty you don't know that's the Lord's will for you or not you see what he means here is this think about the things that you're praying for now we do know and I know that there are some things that you have to give considerable thought to before you pray for them because if you prayed for some things and

[31 : 09] God gave them to you you know your life could become a disaster there have been people like that in the Old Testament Israel paid for things God gave them and he brought leanness in their soul there are people in the world tonight I'm sure of this I know it they've asked God for things and God gave them these things and now they're spending the rest of their lives regretting that they ever asked for these things be not hasty be not rash with the things that you pray for let your words be few remember that God is in heaven and you're on earth and you know my friend when you think of this the almighty omnipotent holy God in heaven here are you and I tonight small specks in this universe all we think was so important I know but really so small and we commit the presence of this holy God and we'll pray no wonder there were times when the psalm said this

Lord he said I feel myself like a brute in thy presence no wonder there were times when people said Lord I don't know what to say to me no wonder I think our lives would be better if we felt oftener like that ourselves the holy God and here are we so unholy who am I who am I to address the almighty therefore my words must be few know then one thing on this this isn't a text upon which you can hang your thoughts about the length of prayers in public you see you can't you can't come away with this and say well you know a prayer should be no more than two minutes three minutes or five minutes you see there is the important thing about prayer is the spirit in which it is offered the zeal the warmth the love the power the spirit behind it and what he's commanding to us is this prayer which is genuine prayer which is real prayer which is fervent prayer which is meaningful and prayer which has the mind and the prayer which has the mind of the spirit of God that's what he's telling and what we have to avoid is this praying for the sake of praying the passage we read there in Matthew in the Sermon on the Mount chapter 6 what Jesus was teaching don't go don't go through don't adopt prayer as a form you know what we say we say our prayer well this is what the Bible here is is warning us against this kind of prayer life just saying it I'll give you a prayer to say I don't like these words I don't like them I prefer the prayer the spirit of God gives me and which I utter in the presence of God be it few alone it's the spirit that counts do you mean it do you really mean it now here there is this worshipper sitting in church and his advice be careful what you pray for I want to ask you a question here tonight sitting in this church exercising as much care as you can can you think just now of one thing that you can genuinely pray for can you think well if you can't let me tell you what what you and I need tonight above all else is that we might have God in our lives as our saviour

God sinners here's a prayer for you God give me yourself as my saviour now you can certainly pray that and know that in praying it you have the mind of the spirit you have the mind of the spirit and that's what he means here see that you know what you're praying for as you sit in church perhaps there's someone here tonight oh well I remember a night myself when I prayed like this sitting in a church what I prayed for was that God would make the preacher stop preaching have you ever prayed that oh lord bring this service to an end make him stop I remember one night praying that prayer in a service when someone was preaching and the preaching was so powerful it directed to myself

I just didn't want to hear anymore I wanted to run away it was getting too much never pray that never pray that prayer because for all you know it may be the last service you'll ever hear the last opportunity you'll ever be given to make your peace with God therefore let your words be few but let them be real and meaningful warm and salous save me oh God save me as a sinner now then at the same time those of us who are engaged in public prayer those of us who have the privilege and the opportunity and the responsibility of leading others in prayer don't don't let your prayers be over long someone put it like this and I like the way he put it nothing is more unacceptable to God than to hold on speaking after we have left off praying but he went on to say this at the same time so long as the heart and the tongue flow together never suppose that your Lord will be weary of your words if your heart and your tongue are united

[37 : 43] God will not weary that prayer but if your heart is away and your tongue is speaking stop that's the best way maybe of summing up what we have here in chapter verses 2 and 3 and you know I said earlier that the prayer that prattles on the fellow prattles on just like a man in the business one who's dreaming all night and there's no connection between his dream and the thing that he was doing through the day finally the spirit in which we have to promise things when thou vows thou vow unto God do fear not to pay it verses 4 to 7 you can read that when you go home now as I said vows were important in worship in these days but the emphasis here is not so much on the making of a vow but on the fulfilling of the vow that is made now this was important there's

an awful example in the book of Judges of a man you've heard about Jephthah the man who promised God that if he would help him when he got home the first thing he would see he would offer it to God remember it when he got home what was the first thing he saw coming at the door of his tent his daughter now that was you see vows are never meant to lead you into sin this is the point never meant to lead you into sin and if you and

I promise a thing as we sit in the presence of God make sure that you honour it this is the point in this verse now a vow is a solemn engagement advisedly made with God and we are not to tamper with the vows and the promises that we make and I suggest to you that every single one of us has made this kind of promise to God at one time or another there are people over a hundred people I think in this church night who sit at the Lord's table from time to time in other words they are members and they take communion one of the things about taking communion is this is that as you sit there you pay your vows to God and you promise what do you promise you promise to remember him till he come you promise to be a better Christian you promise these things in the presence of God and before witnesses there's one such promise have you and I fulfilled it since last we sat at this table here in September have we fulfilled the promise that we made in the presence of God some of us here have been ill very ill and God was good

God was gracious you promised to be this that the next thing has restored you have you fulfilled the promise that you made perhaps you're at difficult cavities things aren't going well with you and you promised God that if you would help you would remember him have you remembered that promise have you fulfilled it you see it's easy to make a promise it's not so easy to fulfill the promise that you make and that's the point that this passage makes here in verses four to seven when you promise in the presence of God to do something to give him something and to be what you have not been make sure that you honor it it is better not to make it than to make it and not to bother honoring it how many of us here tonight have to stand with heads bowed in the presence of God because we have cause to remember the promise that we made and that tonight lies shattered at our feet and he ends with these words fear thou God you see the fool throughout this passage is the the person who says a thing and he doesn't mean it he makes a promise he doesn't pay it he doesn't fulfill it well he says don't be a fool but rather fear God touch them obey them love them that's the meaning of fear this is the ground the first the essential quality in all our actions in all our aptitudes and in all our worship and if you and I fear God tonight that would give meaning to our worship it would give meaning to our life it would give life to our prayers it would give purpose to our listening it would give caution to our promises it would bring a dimension into life that you and I need the fear of God we might honour him obey him and love him take these thoughts with you then remember how you come into his presence remember how you listen in his presence be careful how you pray in his presence and be very careful what you promise in his presence and you call to mind tonight the things that you did promise God in the past and if you haven't fulfilled them by tonight pray for grace that you might fulfill them now let us pray

Lord be merciful to us in no need guide us with thy counsel and help us to put our trust in thee for Jesus sake Amen Amen Amen Amen Amen