



World Christian Fellowship

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Guard Your Steps

The Fear of God — Ecclesiastes 5:1–7

♦ The Sunday Morning That Changed Nothing

A church growth consultant was once asked to assess why a large, successful, growing congregation was producing so few genuine disciples. He attended twelve consecutive Sunday services, interviewed dozens of attenders, and sat with the pastoral team for three days.

His conclusion, delivered at a board meeting, was seven words: **'Your people are attending church, not meeting God.'**

The services were excellent — musically, technically, homiletically.

The productions were polished.

The attendance was impressive.

But almost nobody in the congregation could describe a recent moment of genuine encounter with the living God. They had been to church. They had not been in the presence of God.

Ecclesiastes 5:1–7 is the most direct, most specific, most countercultural passage in the book — and possibly in the entire wisdom tradition. It is God's own prescription for the disease of religious activity without divine encounter.

Ecclesiastes 5:1–2, *"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 are on earth; therefore let your words be few."*

I. Guard your feet — The posture before entering.

'Walk prudently' translates the Hebrew *shomor ragleka* — literally, 'guard your feet.'

The image is of someone walking with deliberate care, watching where each foot falls.

In the context of entering the house of God, it means that you approach the presence of God with the same deliberate care you would give to walking through a minefield.

This is not the language of fear that paralysis, but it is the language of reverence that sharpens awareness.

The person who enters worship without thought, without preparation, without the slightest awareness that they are about to stand before the living God, has committed the first mistake before the service begins.

Exodus 3:4–5, *"So when the LORD saw that he turned aside to look, God called to him from the midst of the bush and said, 'Moses, Moses!' And he said, 'Here I am.' Then He said,*

'Do not draw near this place. Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground.'

The sandals of Moses are the Old Testament equivalent of 'guard your feet.'

Holy ground requires a different kind of stepping.

Not no stepping — but conscious, reverent, aware stepping.

The God who spoke from the burning bush is the same God present in the assembly of His people. The ground has not become less holy because we have become more casual.

Most of us enter our places of worship as consumers entering a store — with our list of what we need, our preferences about the service, our evaluation of whether we are being adequately served.

The Preacher calls us to enter as servants entering the throne room of the King with our full attention, our prepared hearts, and our mouths already shut.

II. Draw near to hear.

'Draw near to hear rather than to give the sacrifice of fools.'

In the temple context, 'giving the sacrifice' referred to the ritual offerings. The formal religious acts that could be performed without internal engagement.

The Preacher is not dismissing sacrifice as a category. He is dismissing sacrifice performed as a substitute for genuine encounter.

'Hear' (shama) in the Hebrew tradition means far more than auditory reception.

Shama means to hear with full attention, to receive into the mind and will, to obey what you have understood.

To draw near to hear is to come to the presence of God with the specific intention of being changed by what you encounter there.

1 Samuel 15:22, *"So Samuel said: 'Has 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 heed than the fat of rams.'"*

Samuel's rebuke of Saul is the prophetic counterpart to Ecclesiastes 5:1.

God takes no pleasure in the performance of religious ritual by a person whose heart is not submitted to His word. The sacrifice of fools, religious activity without genuine submission, is not worship. It is noise.

Isaiah 29:13, *"Therefore the Lord said: 'Inasmuch as these people draw near with their mouths and honour Me with their lips, but have removed their hearts far from Me, and their fear toward Me is taught by the commandment of men...'"*

Isaiah's indictment is the most precise description of the 'sacrifice of fools' in the prophetic literature.

- Lips near.
- Heart far.

This is the disease that Ecclesiastes 5:1 diagnoses and that Jesus quotes Isaiah to address in Matthew 15:8.

The Preacher, the prophet, and the Son of God are in complete agreement: **God is not impressed by religious performance.**

God is present to those who bring Him their actual hearts.

III. Let your words be few- The Theology of Silence.

Ecclesiastes 5:2–3, *"Do not be rash with your mouth, and let not your heart utter anything hastily before God. For God is in heaven, and you are 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."*

'God is in heaven, and you are on earth; therefore, let your words be few.'

This single sentence contains the most important theological information for the practice of prayer.

The infinite disproportionateness between God and the person speaking to Him.

God is in heaven, Omniscient, Omnipotent, Eternal, the source of all that exists.

You are on earth finite, ignorant of most things, dependent for every breath on the God you are addressing. Given this asymmetry, what does it mean to approach God with voluminous, hurried, unfocused speech?

Psalm 46:10, "*Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!*"

The command to 'be still' in Psalm 46:10 is not a counsel of inactivity.

The Hebrew raphah means to let go, to release, to stop striving.

The 'stillness' that leads to knowing God is the cessation of human noise, the deliberate quieting of the internal monologue so that the voice of God can be heard.

God is not silent because He has nothing to say. He is silent in our experience because we have filled every available space with our own voice.

The 'few words' that Ecclesiastes 5:2 commends are not a poverty of communication, but they are the spaciousness that allows God's communication to be received.

The most spiritually significant moments in most people's lives are not moments of eloquent prayer. They are moments of profound silence before God.

IV. Spiritual Integrity.

Ecclesiastes 5:4–6, *"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 that it was an error. Why should God be angry at your voice and destroy the work of your hands?"*

The Preacher's instruction on vows is simultaneously the most practical and the most spiritually severe passage in the chapter.

A vow to God is not a self-improvement goal or a New Year's resolution. It is a legal contract with the sovereign of the universe.

The cultural casualness of contemporary Christian vow-making is precisely what the Preacher addresses: 'Lord, if you heal my child, I will...' 'God, if you give me this job, I will...' These are vows.

When the healing comes, when the job comes and the vow is quietly set aside as the immediate crisis passes something spiritually serious has happened.

The mouth has caused the flesh to sin (5:6), and the work of our hands may be affected.

Numbers 30:2, *"If a man makes a vow to the LORD, or swears an oath to bind himself by some agreement, he shall not break his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth."*

Matthew 5:37, *"But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.' For whatever is more than these is from the evil one."*

Jesus' instruction in the Sermon on the Mount is the New Testament summary of Ecclesiastes 5:4–6.

The simpler solution to the problem of unfulfilled vows is not to make them in the first place.

Let a 'Yes' that you will keep is worth more than a vow decorated with religious language that you will not.

V. The Foundation of it all is to fear God.

Ecclesiastes 5:7, *"For in the multitude of dreams and many words there is also vanity. But fear God."*

After the warnings about empty worship, careless speech, and unfulfilled vows, the Preacher returns to his single, comprehensive prescription: fear God.

- Not perform religion.
- Not accumulate religious experience.
- Not speak eloquently in prayer.

Fear God.

The fear of God is not the beginning of a list of requirements. It is the single root from which all genuine spirituality grows.

When God is genuinely feared when His reality, His holiness, His omniscience, and His sovereignty are genuinely alive in the heart then careful worship follows naturally, few and weighty words follow naturally, fulfilled vows follow naturally.

Proverbs 1:7, *"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction."*

Hebrews 12:28–29, *"Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. For our God is a consuming fire."*

The New Testament's most direct treatment of the fear of God in worship is Hebrews 12:28–29. 'Our God is a consuming fire.'

This is not a relic of the Old Testament. The writer of Hebrews says this in the context of new covenant worship.

The God who speaks from Zion (12:22–24) is no less holy than the God who spoke from Sinai (12:18–21).

The fear of God does not diminish under the new covenant, but it is refined. It is now the fear that drives us to the cross rather than away from the mountain.

Conclusion.

♦ The Moment of True Worship — Isaiah in the Temple

The prophet **Isaiah** entered the temple for what was apparently an ordinary act of worship. We do not know what the service was like, what the music was, or who was preaching. We know only that in that moment, something shifted and he encountered God directly.

'I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple' (Isaiah 6:1). The seraphim cried 'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts.'

And Isaiah's immediate response was not exaltation or spiritual elation. It was collapse: *'Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips.'*

This is what genuine worship does. It does not make you feel better about yourself. It shows you clearly, for the first time, what you are and simultaneously what God is.

The distance between the two is the measure of awe.

Ecclesiastes 5:1: 'Draw near to hear.'

Isaiah drew near.

He heard.

His lips were touched with a coal.

He was sent.

The whole trajectory of his prophetic ministry, the greatest in the Hebrew canon flowed from that one moment of genuine encounter in the temple.

Guard your feet.

Draw near to hear.

Let your words be few.

This is not religious restriction. This is the door to the only encounter that changes everything.

Questions.

Question	Discussion Focus
The Preacher says 'draw near to hear' not 'draw near to express.' What would it look like in your worship practice — personal and corporate — to prioritise hearing over expressing?	Practical reorientation of the worship posture.
'God is in heaven, and you are on earth; therefore let your words be few.' How does this theological asymmetry change the way you approach prayer?	The theology of silence in prayer.
Have you made vows to God that you have not fulfilled? What is the spiritual and practical	Personal and honest application — repentance as needed.

Question	Discussion Focus
consequence of leaving them unfulfilled?	
Isaiah's encounter in the temple (Isaiah 6) began with sight and ended with a mission. Can you describe a moment when genuine encounter with God changed the direction of your life?	Testimonial — the fruit of genuine fear of God.
'Our God is a consuming fire' (Hebrews 12:29). The new covenant does not diminish the holiness of God — it reveals it more fully. How does the cross both intensify and resolve the fear of God?	The gospel as the resolution of the fear the Preacher commends.