

Stand in Awe of God
Ecclesiastes 5:1-7
Rev. Keith Davis

Beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, in July of 2005 the Northwestern Wildcats Women's La Crosse team won the NCAA championship. Later on in the year, they were invited to the White House to be personally greeted and congratulated by President Bush—a great honor to be sure—a once in a lifetime privilege!

All of the players wore skirts or dresses for the occasion, but some of the players chose to wear flip-flops instead of dress shoes. That caused quite a stir in the media (give credit to them for catching the fashion fopa), so after the meeting some of the player's mothers were interviewed.

Those mothers expressed their disappointment that these young ladies failed to show proper decorum and respect for such a great honor and privilege. When the President of the United States invites you to the White House, you don't show up wearing sandals!

As guests, you are to recognize that such a special occasion, such a high honor requires and demands our greatest attention to detail. In the clothes (shoes) we wear, in the way that we act, in the words that we say, we want to show respect for the distinguished office of the President.

Obviously, some of those young ladies had an attitude of indifference about such things. Sadly, beloved, the White House isn't the only place where there is attitude of casual indifference and irreverence. This attitude is also prevalent on any given Sunday, in any given church, whenever and wherever God's people gather for divine worship.

But this attitude of casual indifference is not only seen in the clothes people wear to church. It goes much deeper than that. It is witnessed in the expectations of the worshippers as they draw near to worship; it is heard in the words of the hymns and songs that are sung, it is present in the conversations that take place in the hallways and meeting rooms before and after worship.

This irreverence can be detected even in the message that is preached. This indifference is discernable in the hearts and lives of those who come to worship God, yet they leave the sanctuary having been completely unaffected and unchanged by the ministry of God's Word.

You see, it is entirely possible for someone to approach God in worship, but to fail to offer any real or meaningful worship. Such worship is given a name in Ecclesiastes 5: 1. It is called, “the sacrifice of fools”.

This evening people of God, we are going to consider Ecclesiastes 5, because this passage is so appropriate for our week of preparation; but even more so because this passage is an excellent wake-up call, a timely reminder of our need for Reformation and revival in our worship every Lord’s Day and also in the conduct of our daily lives.

In the words of the wise Teacher, we are called to rekindle the flame of devotion to God, and that begins by fostering an attitude of humility before Him! Here, *Wisdom Teaches us to Watch our Step/to Stand In Awe of our God.*

A. The Background: Solomon the Temple Builder The first thing we need to be aware of (as we consider this passage that deals with worship) is the unique qualifications of the author, King Solomon (the Preacher), to speak to this issue. For the truth is, few men in history have had more experience with the worship of God than did Israel’s third king, king Solomon.

Let’s recall that Solomon was responsible for overseeing one of the world’s greatest building projects every undertaken. It was King Solomon who put into effect the plans of his father David for a great temple to be built to the glory of the Lord.

Remember, the Lord did not allow David to build the temple, but the Lord did reveal to David the plans for the temple, the designs, the various duties of the Levites and priests, etc. In fact, you can start reading about the preparations which David made for the temple back in I Chronicles 22 and you won’t conclude reading about those plans until chapter 29.

And what you read not only has to do with the construction of the physical structure—all the supplies and manpower needed--but you’ll find extensive lists of all those who were incorporated as servants and helpers in the actual worship and liturgy of the temple: men who were skilled musicians and singers; others who were in charge of the treasury of God’s house.

So it was to King Solomon that God had entrusted the monumental task of building the Lord's temple, so Solomon would be bringing to fruition, setting in motion all the plans and designs of his father and heavenly Father. By every description and account of its construction, Solomon's temple (as it is called) was one of the grandest architectural wonders of the ancient world!

Without a doubt, the purpose of its proportions, the materials used in its construction, its elaborate and extensive ornamentation and decoration, was designed to not only glorify God in all of His holiness and greatness—but it was also designed to instill a sense of *awe* in the hearts of the worshippers. It was designed to lift the attention of the worshipper heavenwards.

In other words you could not visit the temple in Jerusalem, without being impressed by your own smallness, by your own insignificance in the face of God's greatness and worth. And what's more, not a single aspect of the worship (the liturgy) that took place within the temple on a daily basis was designed for the *diversion* (for the entertainment) of those in attendance.

No. It was all for the glory of God, so that when the visitor or worshipper left that place, they could not help but be affected (an indelible impression) in their conscience that they had been in the very presence of the almighty God of heaven and earth.

So we can learn from this that the temple (by temple we mean the gathering of God's people for worship—the time when we go to meet our God) was not a place for the casual, for the laid back, for the informal and ordinary. The temple was not a place where one came to voice his opinion, or to speak his mind; it was not a place for the trivial, for the lighthearted, for the easy going.

B. Caution: Watch Your Step! With this background information in mind, you can see why it was necessary for Solomon to caution the people, to caution the worshippers to watch their step, to 'keep their feet' so to speak, when they came into the house of God.

Boys and girls, it wasn't that Solomon was worried about God's people tripping or stumbling in church. We sometimes say that to people when we fear they might stumble and fall: "Hey, be sure to watch your step; don't stumble over that step or that carpet".

No. Solomon's concern is directed at the attitude in the hearts and minds of the people as they approached their holy God in worship. Solomon is warning them not to worship God in a careless manner; not to approach God clumsily, thoughtlessly, as though stumbling about.

Here it helps to understand that the people of God had a very rigorous preparation for worship. In coming to the house of the Lord, they had to prepare animals and breads for the sacrifices and offerings.

In fact, in Leviticus 6:1-7 we can read about the various sacrifices and offerings which the people were required to bring with them to the temple in order to give to the priests for a sacrifice to be made on their behalf. That required preparation; it required self-examination, it reminded them of the purpose for going to the temple—reconciliation with God and with man!

Just look at this in relation to what Jesus said in Matt. 5: 23, *If you are offering your gift on the altar and you remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother, then come and offer your gift!*

So clearly, Christ had the very same warning and admonition for the worshippers of His day. Don't come to the temple, don't come to the house of God, the place of reconciliation between God and man—without first taking heed of, taking care of your own sin. ***The temple was not a place for self-righteous hypocrites, but for the contrite of heart!***

Who can forget the parable Jesus told about the Publican (tax collector) and the Pharisee. Luke 18: 10 tells us that both of these men went into the temple to pray, meaning that both of these men dared to approach God. The Pharisee stood up to pray first. He stood before all and began by praying about himself, saying *I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.*

Then the tax collector stood up. Jesus pointed out that he stood at a distance—already a sign of his humility. And when he prayed he did not lift his eyes to heaven, but rather in his humility and despair, he beat his fists upon his chest and cried out *God have mercy upon me, a sinner.*

One of these men failed to watch his steps when entering the presence of God, and one of these men were very careful. One of these men opened his mouth and offered the sacrifice of fools; while the other offered a sweet smelling sacrifice to God!

I think you boys and girls know whose prayer the Lord heard, and who went home justified before God, as Jesus said! It was the publican, the lowly tax collector, who kept his feet when he entered the presence of the Lord. It was the lowly tax collector (who in his heart and mind, and even in his posture) stood in reverence and awe of God, who is holy and righteous and just!

So this ‘keeping of our feet’ has to do with the utterances of our lips in worship; but beyond that, it has to do with the thoughts of our minds; with the disposition of our hearts, with the nature and character of our attitude and spirit even before we walk into the sanctuary and begin to worship.

C. Knowledge of God: Key to right Worship I know that this was a parable, but permit me to elaborate on this a moment—for the sake of an illustration. It’s not like that publican walked into the temple that day and then, as he was about to pray, he was suddenly (out of the blue) just overcome with feelings of humility, and lowliness and inadequacy before the face of God.

No. On the contrary, it was his spirit of humility, it was the realization of his own inadequacy, and it was his knowledge of who God was--the recognition of God’s holiness and righteousness that drove him to the temple, that drove him to smite his breast, that inspired those precious words in his mouth, *Lord, have mercy on me a sinner!*

You see the right knowledge of God always leads to right worship! As one minister put it: *When we consider the person of our God, our knowledge must always exert an influence upon our attitude when we come to the house of the Lord!*

So too with us, the key to God pleasing worship does not lie in an appropriate call to worship or in a familiar Psalm or Hymn fervently sung. The key to God pleasing worship is not to be found in the reading of the law or in the eloquent words of a congregational prayer.

Yes, those are all proper elements of worship. But the key to right worship, the key to God pleasing worship is found when we worshippers contemplate the knowledge of our God; the key to right worship lies in our awareness of the awesomeness of our God; when with our attitude, and in our spirit, and even in our tears it becomes apparent that we are aware of the infinite difference between ourselves and the mighty One whom we have come to adore!

That is when it is evident that we are humble and sincere and genuine in our worship. It is evident within our hearts, minds, spirits, attitudes, and motives. Why did you come to this place this morning, and again this evening?

What brought you here? What drives you to come here? What is it that brings you back? What is it that you *expect* to happen here? What is it that you *want* to happen here? What is it that you *hope* will happen as you leave here tonight and go back to work and home next week?

When we consider that everything we do in worship has at its basis, its purpose, its foundation the giving of all glory and honor and praise to the God of our salvation, and the calling of sinners to faith and repentance in Christ Jesus our Lord, then it becomes clear what our motives, and purposes, and attitude should be!

Now, if we can remember that every thing about our worship (our thoughts, our attitudes) must be aligned with those purposes, then we can *guard ourselves* against much of the foolishness that has infested so many of the so-called Christian churches of our day.

Brothers and sisters, we do come to the house of our God for the sake of diversion, for the sake of entertainment or amusement. We do not come to the house of the Lord to socialize, or get out of the house, or to meet with our friends, or to try to find Mr. or Mrs. Right.

We do not come to the house of the Lord primarily for our benefit, to see if we can get some kind of spiritual boost or stimulation or motivation from the speaker (you'd be surprised at how many people, once they hear that I'm a minister, ask if I am an inspirational or motivational speaker).

That's an indictment against the church today, whose pastors are no longer preaching the offense of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, but instead they are speaking on so-called practical issues--family issues, financial issues, dating issues, political issues. Their homilies are long on application and encouragement but they are void of the knowledge of God and void of the Gospel. This is not to suggest that the Gospel has nothing to say about those issues-it does in every way. But it is merely to point out that there has been a shift in the purpose and motive and attitude of the worshipping church today.

I believe that in any churches the worshipper has become the focus of attention, instead of the God who is worthy to be worshipped. Worship teams and worship leaders ought to spend their time reflecting on the knowledge of God and how great and awesome he is, on filling the service with the things that **God** wants to see; singing the songs that delight God's ears; and more than anything else, knowing the importance of God speaking His Word to us at every opportunity.

But instead, those worship leaders spend their time reflecting on the knowledge of the people—choosing songs the people like to sing, filling the service with the activities that amuse, that entertain, that captivates; and instead of preaching, the congregation hears personal testimonies, funny anecdotes, and finally a brief light hearted message from he minister.

That's what has become of many churches today. It's Gospel light. It's seeker sensitive. It's people oriented. Call it what you will. Solomon calls it the sacrifice of fools. It is the worship of those who have lost all sense of decorum and propriety in worship.

They have entered into God presence with casual indifference and light-hearted irreverence. They've lost all sight of the holiness, righteousness, and greatness of the God of the universe. They have not kept their feet before the Lord.

D. When Words are Many: Solomon goes on to describe what this worship looks like, and what it sounds like. These worshippers not only approach God thoughtlessly, without regard for the knowledge of God, but they even worship Him thoughtlessly, carelessly, no giving care to their words!

Look at Vv. 2-3 (read them). We noted before the difference between the prayer of the Pharisee and the prayer of the Publican. Besides the spirit of humility, the Publican also displayed a surprising candor, ‘concise brevity’ to his words—his words were few, but they were to the point—*have mercy on me a sinner*.

Whereas the Pharisee was just like the fool of our text—the man of many words! The foolish worshipper is not struck with awe in the presence of God, he is not silent, but rather he is quick with his mouth, hasty in his heart, no doubt pouring forth streams of piety, but with very little meaning behind it. His words are meaningless—in keeping with the theme of this book!

Verse 3 says, *as a dream comes when there are many cares, so the speech of a fool when there are many words*. You’ve had dreams like that I’m sure, when there is so much on our minds that our dreams are troubling; our minds are overrun with thoughts, so we countless images flash through our minds and they have no meaning, they make little or no sense.

Such are the words and worship of a fool. Many words are raised up, many vows are made before God, no doubt many promises are made to serve God, to love God with ever more fervency, to promise to stop doing this and to start doing that!

But as vs. 7 says, *Much dreaming and many words are meaningless!* Wise worship is worship that flows from a humble heart, from a lowly spirit, from a worshipper who has a keen understanding of his place before God.

That is to be preferred over the aimless chatter of a fool. Wise worshippers are those who *stand in awe of God*; who listen to what God has to say, whose minds and hearts are filled with the beautiful message of His Word, not cluttered with their own thoughts!

William Temple, the archbishop of Canterbury once wrote these words: *For to worship is to quicken the conscience by the **holiness** of God; (worship is) to feed the mind with the **truth** of God, to purge the imagination by the **beauty** of God, (worship is) to open the heart to the **love** of God; to devote the **will** to the purpose of God!*

Beloved, worship is more than just coming to church and mindlessly plopping ourselves down in a pew for 60 minutes. Boys and girls, worship should not be boring to us; we shouldn't sit here and look for things to do to pass the time.

No! We should be actively involved in all that goes on here, reflecting thoughtfully on every song that we sing, listening intently to every verse that we read, humbly obeying the call of the Gospel in the sermon, and eagerly giving of our gifts for the offering.

And, in all these ways we are showing God that we are aware of who God is, and we are well aware of who we are. We are the guests in God's house; by nature, we are unrighteous, unworthy, and undeserving guests who've been called to worship the great and holy Name of our God.

And so we heed the call to worship and we come to church in all humility, showing respect and reverence for God, acknowledging God's exalted state in the very simplest of ways--by the very clothes that we wear to church, understanding that there is no higher calling, there is no more important activity in all our time here on earth, there is no more distinguished moment in all our lives time than gathering together for corporate worship, standing in the very presence of God.

And yet beloved, we have to know that the wise worship of God goes well beyond what takes place here in church. For we cannot come into the presence of God, singing His praises, and hearing His Word, and being assured of our forgiveness and salvation, without being forever changed and affected!

Our lives, our words, our conduct, our attitude will be the ultimate test of the sincerity and character of our worship. Do we sing God's praises before our brothers today, only to return to work tomorrow and loudly profane God's name in front of our co-workers?

Do we passionately cry out to God for forgiveness today, only to return to the same sin tomorrow? Are we quick to make promises before God today to hear and do His Word, only to leave this place and forget everything we heard, and every vow that we made?

So there is a more to worship that meets the eye. Yet our comfort comes in knowing that God equips us and empowers us for worship by His Holy Spirit. Our calling is to yield our hearts and minds to His Spirit, to reverence ourselves before Him, to stand in holy awe of Him; to enter His presence with reverence, with respect, acknowledging Who He is and what He has done!