

7.

V. HASTY SPEECH IS VANITY

Ecclesiastes 5:1-5

- VII. Watch your feet when you go to the house of God (5:1a)
- A. And drawing near to listen is better than the fool's offering of a slaughter-offering, for they do not know that they are doing evil (5:1b-3).
1. Do not be quick with your mouth (5:2a);
 2. And do not let your heart rush to bring forth a word at God's face (5:2b-3),
 - a. For God is in heaven and you are on the earth; therefore, let your words be few (5:2c).
 - b. For the dream comes with much activity, and a fool's speech with many words (5:3).
- B. When you vow a vow to God, do not be late in completing it (5:4-7)
1. For [He finds] no pleasure in the fools (5:4c)
 - a. Complete what you vow (5:4d).
 - b. It is better that you not vow than that you vow and not complete it (5:5).
 2. Do not allow your mouth to cause your body to sin, and do not say to the Angel's face that it [was] a mistake (5:6a).
 - a. Why should God be angry with your speech and destroy the work of your hands (5:6b).
 - b. Because where dreams abound, both vanities and words increase (5:7a).
 3. Instead fear God (5:7b).

A fifth topic that Solomon found to be vanity and futile was glib talking, especially in God's presence (v. 1a). God holds a person responsible for his words as well as his deeds. Solomon warned that irresponsible speech is a sin and an offense to God.

Solomon cautioned his readers to watch their feet when they walked into God's house. The word "watch" refers to the attention of a watchman guarding a gate or manning a watchtower of a walled city or sitting in a tower to protect a farm from intruding animals, enemies, or thieves. Solomon admonished people to stand watch over their feet in the same way when they entered the temple. However, the remainder of this passage clearly shows that those words of caution were not directed toward how people should move about when they went to the temple but to how they should speak. He stressed that sincere speech, not glib speech, was appropriate in the house of God.

Verses 1b-3. Listening is better than rituals done for their own sake. Solomon said the proper approach to worship was to enter to listen and to learn, rather than to speak and express opinions. God is much more pleased with a person who

listens and learns than with a person who speaks with a shallow understanding of what he is talking about. The person who talks more than he listens is a fool. He thinks his many words will impress God, when actually God considers his loose words to be evil. Unfortunately, he is talking so much he does not take time to realize he is doing evil

Solomon's emphasis at this point is of massive significance. He stressed that using the temple as a place for teaching and learning was more important than using it as a place for ritual. Most people today do not think of Israel's temple in that light, and perhaps when Israel's temple stood most Israelites did not think of it in that light. Solomon definitely did, and if Israel had so honored it maybe it would not have had to be torn down.

Solomon specifically said listening to learn is better than a fool's slaughter-offering. A fool's slaughter-offering was an offering offered in perfect form but without giving attention to its meaning (v. 1b). It was an offering offered as a ceremony, not as a sincere expression of the heart. It was an offering made to have something to talk about instead of something to please God.

A slaughter-offering was one of the five types of offerings an Israelite could offer at the temple. The name of that offering is translated in different ways by different translators. The two most frequent translations are “sacrifice” and “fellowship offering.” The most literal translation of the meaning of the Hebrew name is “slaughter-offering.” That name related the offering to occasions in ancient times when a family slaughtered an animal that had been fattened to provide food for the winter. It was common for neighbors and friends to gather to assist the family with the work. They would slaughter the animal, prepare the meat for preservation during the winter, cook a meal from the fresh meat, and sit down to enjoy it together. The slaughter-offering that God authorized for use at the temple had a similar significance. It symbolized cooperation and fellowship among God’s people. It showed that God’s people were a large group of friendly neighbors and that they were expected to love one another and work together (Lev. 3:1-17; 7:11-38). The ritual of the slaughter-offering was that, after the blood of the offering was spilled around the altar, the meat of the animal was shared among God and His people. Part of the meat was roasted on the altar as God’s part of a fellowship meal. Another part of the meat was given to the priests to provide their part of the meal. The remainder of the meat was cooked by the offerer in the court yard of the temple and was eaten by him, his family, and his guests to provide the worshiper’s part of the fellowship meal. The slaughter-offering had a beautiful and significant meaning for Jehovah worshipers because it symbolized love and fellowship shared by God, His ministers, and His worshipers.

Solomon said it was better to go to the temple without a slaughter-offering if the person went to listen and to learn than it was for him to go to the temple and offer an offering with an insincere heart. The person who offered a fire-offering in the temple without discerning its meaning was foolish and wasting his time. Jehovah has always taught that the essence of worship is sincere, heartfelt submission to God and that rituals are significant only if they are observed to symbolize the genuine feelings and commitments of the worshipers’ hearts. Solomon had offered thousands of offerings when

he dedicated the temple (2 Chron. 5-5), but as he drew near to the end of his life he knew that the abundance of the offerings was not nearly as important as what was in the heart of the worshiper.

Solomon stressed again that in the house of God a person should limit his words to what he really means, and he added that a person should control his heart and not let it stimulate his mouth to bring forth hasty words when he was standing before God’s face in His house (v. 2a-2b). By the “heart,” the Israelites meant a person’s whole inner self. It included a person’s thoughts as well as his feelings. When Solomon urged worshipers to control their hearts, he meant they should not let their emotions or their knowledge of the rituals cause them to speak hastily. They were in God’s house to learn, not to release their emotions or to show off their knowledge. Therefore, they should control their outward actions and their inner feelings. He gave two reasons for that advice.

Solomon’s first reason was that God was in heaven, while His worshipers were on the earth (v. 2c). He meant God was in a position of authority over all things, while a worshiper is weak and limited on the earth. A worshiper should be careful not to try to deceive God with a lot of words because God recognizes hypocrisy for what it is and rejects both the offering and the meaningless words of an insincere worshiper. When a worshiper displeased God, he offended the God who was seated in the heavens and Ruler of the heavens and the earth.

Solomon’s second reason was that dreams produce a lot of activity and a fool’s speech produces a lot of words (v. 3). Various opinions have been offered concerning what Solomon meant by “dreams.” Night dreams during sleep would be an intrusion into this passage, because the subject is worship in the temple, not sleep in bed. Dreams in the sense of visions from God are equally unconnected with the subject of the passage. The most meaningful explanation is that Solomon was talking about people whose big talk was just dreaming. It was all imaginary. It was bragging unconnected with the reality of their lives. Solomon said such dreaming produces much activity, but the activity he was referring to was

agitation and motion, not meaningful productive work.

That meaning for “dreams” is congenial with the second clause of the sentence, which says that a fool’s speech produces a lot of words. A fool’s speech is the pointless talk of a man whose life does not back up his talk. A foolish person whose speech is unconnected with his real life has to talk a lot to excuse himself or exalt himself, but his many words have no substance or reality. They only amount to a lot of noise. The better way is for a person to speak little and let his life testify to what he is.

Verses 4-7. An unkept vow is a sin. Solomon then turned to another area in which sincere speech was important when worshipers went into the house of God. That aspect was the making of vows. A vow was a promise to make a donation of goods or money or service to the support of the temple and of those who served there. Solomon stressed that vows were serious business. A person should not make a vow unless he definitely was going to keep it.

In Israel the practice was that, when a person made a vow to God, he went to the temple to present a formal promise of what he was going to do for God or give to God at some future time. Then when the time came for him to fulfill or complete his vow, he returned to the temple to carry out what he had promised. When he returned, along with his gift he brought a special type of fire-offering called an “homage-offering” to accompany the fulfillment of his vow (Lev. 16; 22:17-33; 27:1-29). Most English versions translate the name of that offering as “meat offering” or “meal offering” or “grain offering” (Lev. 2:1-16). A literal translation of the Hebrew name for the offering is “homage-offering,” indicating that the person’s gift was a means of expressing homage to God. By it he recognized that God was the owner of all he possessed and that God had entrusted a portion of his vast holdings to him to use. The homage-offering symbolized the reason he made and fulfilled his vow and the spirit in which he brought it. Solomon emphasized that a person who went through the ritual of making such a vow should take care to fulfill it as he promised, because God is not

pleased with beautiful words that are not backed with the action. He considers generous promises that are not kept to be foolishness, the actions of a fool.

Because God honors sincere words, Solomon stressed that it is better not to make a vow than to make a vow and fail to fulfill it (v. 5). He pointed to the seriousness of that failure in two ways. (1) If a person made a vow and did not fulfill it, the words that came from his mouth made his whole body sin, because his whole body has participated in the failure. (2) When it was time for him to fulfill the vow if he went to the temple without taking with him what he had promised, he would have to confess to The Angel that making the promise was a mistake. In Hebrew, the primary meaning for the word for “angel” is “messenger.” Angels often served as messengers for God to reveal His truths or His will to people. Throughout the Old Testament, one special Messenger or Angel was distinct from all other angels and was used by God to deliver God’s most important messages. That Angel was sometimes called “The Angel of Jehovah” or “The Angel of God.” Whenever He appeared, He always was recognized as God, and yet as distinct from God. The only Person who can fit that description is the One who later became a man to bring God’s most complete message to people, who is Jesus.

Solomon understood that that special Messenger from God was present in the temple to witness the worship of God’s people and to observe the fulfillment of vows by His worshipers. If the worshiper came without the gift or service he had promised, he would have to confess his failure in the presence of The Angel, who was both God’s Messenger and God Himself. The Hebrews may not have understood all the significance of such a Person, as we also do not fully understand how Jesus can be God and yet the Son of God, even after the many additional revelations we have received. Nonetheless, they honored the God who had manifold powers and who could communicate in many ways. They knew God had a special Messenger who had appeared numerous times with special revelations about God. Solomon shows that He knew that that Messenger was present when God’s people gathered to worship Him. His words about the Messenger or Angel mean that it would be

a huge embarrassment for a person to have to confess to that Angel that he made a mistake when he promised what he either could not or would not do.

Many other explanations have been given for this special Angel, but all of them seek to explain the meaning based on the assumption that Solomon was talking about “an angel.” However, Solomon used the definite article when speaking of The Angel, and the actual words he used should not be considered to be insignificant. Only one unique one-of-a-kind Angel is mentioned in the Bible, and He alone is called “The Angel.” Commentators who give other explanations of Solomon’s words always are uncertain about their views, and their interpretations are tenuous and limp. Only accepting that Solomon was talking about The Angel of Jehovah makes his words meaningful and powerful.

Solomon went on to further emphasize the seriousness of failing to keep a vow by saying that not keeping a vow made God angry. God expressed his displeasure by taking away objects or wealth

that had come from the work of the man’s hands (v. 6b). That punishment is appropriate, because the man took away what he had promised to God, so God was right in showing him the seriousness of his failure by taking away items that were valuable to him..

Then Solomon added still another way that failing to keep vows was evil and dangerous. He said that when a person’s promises were just dreams and not reality, he had to justify himself with many vain actions and untrue words (v. 7a). His making false promises produced more false actions and words. The more he talked, the more vain and futile his words became. His sin grew and multiplied, as sin always does.

Solomon closed his serious warnings with a brief, pungent suggestion. Instead of all of that false talking, a person should simply fear God in his heart (v. 7b). By fear, Solomon meant having an awesome respect for the overpowering almighty God. If a worshiper came to God’s house with that attitude in his heart, empty words would be unnecessary.