

Ecclesiastes 5:1–7 | “How to Approach God”
Preached on June 28, 2026 by Pastor Matt Brown

You can turn in your Bibles to Ecclesiastes 5, and we will be in verses 1–7 this morning.
[pauseeee]

It’s been a while since we were in Ecclesiastes, but the author in the most recent chapters has been tackling different topics, giving us much needed instruction. *[pause]*

In chapter 4, he talked about oppression, work, the need for others, power, and popularity.

And today, we will read a section about worship—so let’s READ it. *[READ 1–7]*

We all need instructions. *[pauseeee]*

A while ago, someone bought us the playset that’s in our backyard, which has swings, monkey bars, and a slide. *[pauseee]*

Now this playset didn’t come put together, but me and my dad had to put it together first. *[pause]*

What was important were the instructions, or else it wouldn’t have ended up good at all.
[pauseeee]

Instructions teach us how to rightly do something, for without instructions, we could end up doing a lot of wrong things.

And this is why managers at workplaces instruct those they manage, so that their employees will perform their tasks in the right way. *[pauseee]*

We need instructions! *[pauseeee]*

We need instructions not only to build playsets or work at our jobs, but we need instructions for how to approach and relate to God.

And thankfully, God doesn’t leave us in the dark about this, but He has provided His Word to instruct us. *[pauseeee]*

The author of Ecclesiastes takes up the role of ‘instructor’ in the text before us and gives us vital instructions for worship.

He helps prepare us for the best way to approach God, so as to not be sinful nor foolish, as we do so. *[pauseee]*

This shows us that God truly does care about how we relate to Him, worship Him, and live for Him, but will we “draw near to listen”? *[pauseeee]*

So what does the wise Solomon teach us about how to approach God?...

The main thing he teaches us is to...

Guard your approach to God. (1a)

A couple weeks ago, when we were on vacation, our family went hiking. *[pause]*

The trail we were on wasn't super difficult, but there were lots of roots, and it was right next to a steep dropoff at times. *[pause]*

Due to this, I told my kids that they needed to make sure to watch their steps. *[pause]*

This is because when you are hiking on a trail like that, you need to “guard your steps,” for to not do so could lead to disaster. *[pauseeee]*

That idea of “watching where you step” is the imagery used here. *[pause]*

Now the author isn't talking about making sure that you don't literally trip on the steps of the house of God, but is calling us to keep watch on how we approach God in worship. *[pauseeee]*

If you look at the whole passage, you can tell that he's very serious and matter-of-fact about this. *[pause]*

This is not something to take lightly, but he uses a bunch of “do's” and “don't's” here.

He wants us to take God seriously, and that means not taking worship of Him lightly. *[pauseeee]*

I wonder if we even consider how we approach God in worship? *[pause]*

Do we relate to God in a flippant way? *[pause]*

Is He just a “buddy” to you? *[pauseeee]*

The Corinthian church was guilty of not guarding their steps when it came to the Lord's Supper. *[pause]*

For the richer Christians, it became a time to indulge themselves, yet Paul warns them of the consequences of taking it lightly.¹ *[pauseeee]*

In our very informal, sometimes irreverent, evangelical culture, we need a text like this to reorient us to the seriousness of worship. *[pause]*

This doesn't mean that we have to all be in suits and ties, come in quiet as mice, or something like that.

But it does mean that we need to remember what we are doing here, why we are here, and who it is that we are worshiping. *[pauseeee]*

¹ See especially 1 Corinthians 11:27.

This ‘guarding of our steps’ takes *intentionality* and *carefulness*. [pause]

When you guard your steps, you are intentional and careful about where you step because you don’t want to step in the wrong spot.

And so also, we need to be intentional about how we approach God, and not reckless. [pause]

If you sit back and cruise, you will default to flippancy, indifference, or shallowness. [pauseeee]

This means that we need to remind ourselves of what God calls us to, what we are doing, and why. [pauseee]

I know that as your pastor I could do better at reminding us all of why we are here and what we are doing.

It’s easy to just do things because we always do them, without intentionally and carefully dwelling upon why we are doing them.

So let’s be intentional and careful as we approach God. [pauseeee]

Next, guarding your steps means you take it *seriously*. [pause]

Is living for the Lord and coming to church all fun and games to you? [pause]

Is it just a little thing to do on the side? [pause]

Is it just another community gathering to you, or is it something deep, profound, and holy? [pauseeeee]

Let me give you an example of not guarding your steps as you approach God...

My wife once read a book that essentially said, “Why not make Communion more fun by using cake and whatever drink you have on hand in the place of the bread and the cup?”² [pauseee]

Let’s just say that she got rid of the book. [pause]

That’s not being intentional, careful, nor serious.

We don’t change the things of God simply because we want to have more fun with it. [pause]

And we have no right to casually change out the elements that God has set in place, and replace them with some other food or drink that we want to use. [pauseeee]

Guard your approach to God: that’s the author’s main point, and in the rest of the passage, he will teach us how we can do this. [pause]

² The book was *Have More Fun* by Mandy Arioto. I DO NOT recommend reading this book, as it has many problems. We received it because my wife was a part of a MOPS group, where Mandy is the CEO. (MOPS is now called MomCo.)

First, he tells us that...

I. It's better to listen than to speak foolishly before God. (1b–3)

General George Marshall once gave the “formula for handling people: #1. Listen to the other person’s story. *[pause]*

#2. Listen to the other person’s *full* story. *[pause]*

#3. Listen to the other person’s full story *first*.”³ *[pauseeee]*

We often talk way more than we listen, and sometimes we live by the motto of: “talk first, listen second.”

But that’s not the way it’s supposed to be, especially when it comes to relating to God. *[pause]*

It’s one thing to not listen closely to others, it’s another to not listen closely to the Lord. *[pauseeee]*

Look there at the middle of verse 1, “To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools.” *[pause]*

This means that God would rather you attentively listen than to foolishly act. *[pauseeee]*

We often feel like, “I need to say something, I need to do something...”

But how often do you tell yourself, “I need to listen”? *[pauseee]*

This is especially seen on social media...

When something happens, people feel like they just *have* to say something about it and are quick to say or write something. *[pause]*

There’s little patient listening first, but the Bible is telling us, “It’s better to listen than to do or say something foolish.” *[pause]*

Our default should be, “I *need* to listen.” *[pauseeee]*

In our culture, listening and silence are sometimes seen as weakness and passiveness, and speaking as strength and confidence...

But the Bible is showing us that speaking without listening is *foolishness*. *[pauseee]*

Attentive listening and sometimes silence are what should characterize a Christian’s life—this is why James tells us, “...let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak...”⁴ *[pauseeee]*

³ Found at: <https://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/l/listening.htm>. Original from: Gen. George Marshall, *Bits & Pieces*, April, 1991. (Italics added by me.)

⁴ James 1:19b.

The passage before us is speaking primarily about listening in relation to God and what He wants. *[pause]*

So what would this look like?...

Well to “draw near to listen” means that you cannot come with a “I know it all” mindset. *[pause]*

We need to be people who aren’t always saying, “Come and hear more of what I know,” but instead saying, “Teach me more, I want to learn!” *[pauseeee]*

Do you come to church with a ‘know-it-all’ posture, or a ‘drawing-near-to-listen’ one? *[pause]*

Every Sunday should be a time of thinking, “Lord, I want to learn more today.” *[pause]*

Even if you have heard a certain passage many times before, never stop listening and learning because God is constantly teaching and reminding us through His Word. *[pauseee]*

I don’t care how many years you have been a Christian, or how many sermons you heard in your lifetime, never stop listening! *[pauseeee]*

Here are some other ways that we could be guilty of not drawing near to listen...

We could attend church, just because it’s something we have always done, rather than attending to know and worship God. *[pause]*

We could sit through sermons, daydreaming, instead of sitting and being attentive to God’s Word. *[pauseeee]*

What about this: have you ever found yourself trying to tell God what He should be doing?

That’s the opposite of “drawing near to listen.” *[pauseeee]*

In this passage, we find a phrase called, “The sacrifice of fools.” *[pause]*

These are the things said or done for God that are not according to what He wants. *[pauseee]*

Maybe someone rashly does something in worship or flippantly says something about God. *[pause]*

It’s a person who *assumes* that they know what God wants, but it’s not what God wants. *[pauseeee]*

Look at what it says of the sacrifice of fools at the end of verse 1, “they do not know that they are doing evil.” *[pause]*

In their rush past listening, they act in ignorance, believing that they are approaching God rightly, but they are actually doing something wrong. *[pauseeee]*

The sacrifice of fools may *fool* other people, but it does not fool God. *[pausee]*

Often people like this do things to try to impress others with their knowledge or godliness, but it's a smokescreen, and what's really there is folly. *[pauseee]*

Sometimes people will use language like, "God told me to do this..." even though it's something directly against God's Word.

No, your holy-sounding language doesn't change the fact that that's a sacrifice of fools. *[pauseee]*

The truth is that God demands things to be done a certain way. *[pause]*

He gave us His Word so that we would know what He wants, but we must draw near to listen.

And this is why we as a church seek to follow the Scriptures in everything we do, for we believe the Scriptures to be "the supreme and final authority in faith and life."⁵ *[pauseee]*

If we find that we are doing something unbiblical, we should lay aside our desires, and submit them to what we read in the Word. *[pauseee]*

Regularly evaluate what you are doing to make sure it aligns with God's directives, or do you assume that you know what's best? *[pause]*

If so, watch out, for you could be guilty of the sacrifice of fools. *[pauseee]*

These 'sacrifices of fools' can be shown through rash words spoken before God.

We see that in verse 2, "Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God." *[pausee]*

Sometimes we do not think before we speak—our mouth often starts working before our mind does. *[pauseee]*

I've recently had times like this in my own life, where I spoke first and then my mind caught up with my words, and I was like, "Ugh, why did I say that?!"

It's so easy to do! *[pauseee]*

Have you ever prayed words that you didn't actually mean?

That could be a hasty word uttered before God. *[pausee]*

Speaking of prayer, giving flippant prayers without thought can also be an application of this. *[pause]*

⁵ From First Baptist Church of Clearfield, PA's constitution: section 2.01B.

Also, giving prayers that seek to impress others. *[pauseeee]*

We need to pray genuine, reverent prayers to God, and *both* of those adjectives are vital. *[pauseeee]*

Another way to be guilty of a sacrifice of fools is to do fake repentance. *[pause]*

Often this “repentance” is quickly spurted out to get it over with, but it’s a rash word spoken because you don’t actually mean it. *[pauseee]*

Likewise, for some people, they have lots of righteous-sounding speech, but there’s no actual, real-life obedience. *[pauseeee]*

Now why is it that we should guard our steps by guarding our mouths as we approach God?...

The main reason is given in the middle of verse 2, “for God is in heaven and you are on earth.” *[pauseee]*

We are to approach God rightly by remembering who He is and who we are. *[pause]*

God is God and I am not—when I truly remember that, it humbles me.

It leads me to a certain reverence for God, where I don’t want to be casual or flippant or rash when it comes to Him. *[pauseee]*

He is loving, but He is also holy—He is our Father, but also our Lord.

Who am I to try to tell *Him* what to do, who am I to treat *Him* flippantly, who am I to speak rash or hasty words before *Him*? *[pauseeee]*

When you remember who God is, you revere Him, and so submit your will to His—you are now ready to humbly draw near to listen. *[pause]*

As the passage tells us, “Therefore let your words be few,” so as I approach God, my listening should exceed my speaking. *[pauseeee]*

Another reason why we need to guard our mouths as we relate to God is because the more words, the more folly, so the less words, the better. *[pause]*

Verse 3 says, “For a dream comes with much business, and a fool’s voice with many words.” *[pauseeee]*

This connects right with the book of Proverbs which warns us that, “When words are many, transgression is not lacking...”⁶ and James reminds us that the tongue is hard to tame.⁷ *[pause]*

⁶ Proverbs 10:19.

⁷ A reference to James 3:7–8.

Knowing that, we should be careful to not just spout out everything that pops into our mind with no filter. *[pauseeee]*

It's better to listen than to speak foolishly before God.

So is 'ready to listen' your approach to God, or are you rash and flippant when it comes to Him? *[pauseeee]*

The second thing that we see is that...

II. It's better to not promise something to God than to promise and not fulfill it. (4–7)

"Captain Robert Campbell was a British POW captured by Germany during World War I. *[pause]*

When his mother became gravely ill, he begged to visit her. *[pause]*

He promised Kaiser Wilhelm II that if he would be allowed to leave captivity and see his mother, he would voluntarily return to be imprisoned again. *[pauseee]*

Campbell was granted his request, and he was a man of his word.

Though he could have easily decided to take the easy route and not return, he kept his promise."⁸ *[pause]*

Isn't that amazing? A promise made, a promise kept, even at great cost. *[pauseeee]*

Sadly, that's not always the case, for history is strewn with broken promises...

Politicians have broken their promises to us so much so that we just assume it's going to happen. *[pause]*

Other people have broken their promises to us, and it hurts. *[pause]*

But here's the thing: we can also break our promises to God, and that's the type of thing that the author speaks about here. *[pauseeee]*

Specifically, he talks about *vows* made to God.

He says in verse 4, "When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow." *[pauseeee]*

Vows in the Old Testament weren't required, but were mainly voluntary, except in a few legal contexts.⁹

⁸ Found at: <https://illustrationideas.bible/his-word-is-his-bond/>. Original source: "The British WWI Prisoner of War Who Returned to Captivity," BBC News, September 4, 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-23957605>.

⁹ See Exodus 22:10–11 for an example of a required oath in a legal context.

And people would use vows to express their devotion to God, or to show gratitude to God.

They would promise to do or give something to the Lord. *[pauseeee]*

The writer makes the point that you don't have to make a vow, but if you do make one, you better do it...

So the vow is *voluntary*, but once you make a vow, performing it is *required*. *[pause]*

In fact, don't delay in doing it, because some people could keep putting it off, saying, "I'll do it, I'll do it..." but never actually "do it."

And to do that is to be a fool in God's eyes, and God has no pleasure in fools. *[pause]*

Therefore, worshipers of God should be *slow* to make a vow, and *quick* to fulfill them, if they do. *[pauseeee]*

In these instructions, we see that God desires for us to be genuine, honest people, who are faithful to our word. *[pause]*

We ought to take promises made to God as serious, remembering who it is that we are promising it to. *[pauseeee]*

This means that you should definitely not make a promise to God in the heat of emotion, for you could very well be making it based on emotion. *[pauseeee]*

Since breaking a promise to God is such a big deal, the author says in verse 5, "It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay." *[pause]*

Better to just not even make a vow.

Even Jesus pushes us away from vow-making by telling us, "Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'."¹⁰ *[pauseeee]*

Sometimes when we promise something, we can try to mask what we said by saying, "It was a mistake."

But God wants us to be people of our word—He is not pleased when we carelessly speak or flippantly promise. *[pauseeee]*

So no making promises in the height of emotion.

No making large commitments that you haven't thought through to impress God or others.

Think before you speak, and be a person of your word. *[pauseeee]*

¹⁰ Matthew 5:37a.

We could be guilty of this kind of thing when we say, “God, if you get me out of this, I’ll do this or that.” *[pause]*

Or we make statements to God like, “I promise, I’m going to start reading my Bible every single day.”

Or, “I swear, I’ll stop this sin for good!” *[pauseeee]*

Maybe one that’s more common is saying to others, “I’ll pray for you.” *[pause]*

You said you would do it, but did you? *[pauseeee]*

Like many dreams, so lots of words are empty of substance. *[pause]*

Put another way: the more words, the more likelihood of empty fluff, so think through what you say! *[pauseeee]*

Let’s not get caught using meaningless words by flippantly saying things that we haven’t thought through.

Instead, as the passage says at the end of verse 7, “God is the one you must fear.” *[pauseeee]*

When you have a genuine reverence for God as God, you will be careful with how you speak to Him or about Him.

You will want to please Him, and not flippantly speak. *[pauseeee]*

How many of our promises to God would we alter, or not say at all, if we remembered who it is that we are speaking to? *[pauseeee]*

You see, we are to...

Approach God with reverence, not flippancy.

God doesn’t want us to be flippant or irreverent in our worship of Him, but serious and intentional.

So let’s guard our steps as we approach Him! *[pauseeee]*

The key is remembering *who* we serve...

We serve the holy, creator God, who made us.

He knows everything and we are accountable to Him in how we worship Him. *[pauseeee]*

When we truly have a right view of God, we will end up having the right approach to God. *[pauseee]*

He is not our “buddy,” who doesn’t care how we do things.

This is no joke.

This is no flippant endeavor that we are involved in here. *[pause]*

This is no mere community group, who deems what's best for us to do based on our own thoughts—we are serving the Lord God Almighty. *[pause]*

So let's draw near to Him to listen, *always!* *[pause]*

Let's never feel like we have “arrived” and “know it all,” but let's be constant listeners and learners.

Let's continually seek to line up what we do with God's Word. *[pause]*

Let's not be rash in saying or deciding things, but let's use wisdom. *[pauseeeee]*

When we are people of our word, it's only because of God, and we reflect Him when we are. *[pause]*

All along the way of history, God made promise after promise, and fulfillment after fulfillment. *[pause]*

He was not rash with His words to us, but He promised a deliverer to save us, and fulfilled His Word through Jesus Christ! *[pauseee]*

We were in our sins, under condemnation and judgment, but God uttered words of salvation that were filled with mercy and grace. *[pause]*

He paid what He vowed by giving us His only Son to die for us.

And now, those of us who have repented of our sins and trusted in Him alone, have forgiveness and eternal life. *[pause]*

Now, because of God's sure and certain Word, Scripture says, “We who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us.”¹¹ *[pauseeee]*

Be encouraged—you have a promise-keeping, Almighty, Creator God...

And so knowing this and knowing Him, take serving Him seriously and not flippantly. *[pause]*

But also, knowing Him, we know that He is near to us with grace and mercy for all of the times that we have failed.

For He is truly, “The Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and *faithfulness*.”¹²

¹¹ Hebrews 6:18b.

¹² Exodus 34:6 (italics added by me).