

Worthless Worship

July 17th, 2011

Ecclesiastes 5:1-7

"Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they are doing evil. ²Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few."

This text may get a little too close for our comfort, because in Ecclesiastes the Preacher, has been stepping into the shoes of a "secular humanist" and exploring various avenues of life searching for meaning and purpose: the intellect, sexual pleasure, material possessions, work, politics. Yet over and over again, his conclusion has been, "vanity".

But here, in his exploration for meaning and fulfillment the Preacher turns to "the house of God," but it's full of the same foolishness and vanity that he observes in the "secular" world. There can be foolishness and vanity *in the church*. This text is about a fool who goes to worship; so just because you're attending a worship service, and you're here to worship the real, true God, doesn't necessarily prevent you from being a fool.

So to help us discern this matter of vanity in the church -- worthless worship -- the Preacher presents a truth about God that should shape and govern all true worship of God. Then he's going to describe some practices and attitudes in worship that tend to obscure that truth about God and thus make our worship of Him vain and foolish.

Truth: God is Great

First, the fundamental truth about God which should shape and govern all our worship. All the instruction in this passage (both the examples to follow, and the examples to avoid) seems to be built on this truth: "²Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, *for God is in heaven and you are on*

earth. Therefore let your words be few." This is a declaration of God's greatness, His transcendence. He is big, amazing, awesome, supreme, exalted, majestic. God is all that...and you are not.

But it's hard to define God's transcendence; I think it's easier to illustrate it. And the best way I know to illustrate it is by looking to God's creation. The heavens are telling the glory of God (Psalm 19), so let's consider the heavens. Let's just think about our solar system for a few minutes. Probably you've seen a picture of the solar system in a school textbook; you can see that Earth is tiny compared to Jupiter, but you don't really get a sense of the immensity of the whole thing.

So let's start with a basketball, and imagine this basketball is the sun. By that scale, Earth would be the size of a peppercorn, and it would be out on the front steps in relation to our basketball-sun. The farthest planet from the sun is Neptune, which would be the size of a jellybean and would be at Merritt's Flowers, around .5 miles from here. Eris, discovered in 2005, is a dwarf planet and is the farthest dwarf planet from the sun. It would be the size of a pinhead, and located over at the Pitman High School, 1.5 miles away.

But there's more: the Oort cloud is what scientists think is a huge spherical cloud of particles that reach to the outer extent of the sun's gravitational pull. In our model, with the basketball as the sun, the Oort cloud would be located around Dallas, TX, around 1,400 miles away! And that's just our solar system, which is one of millions of solar systems in our galaxy, which itself is just one of billions of galaxies in the universe.

And the Scriptures teach (Isaiah 40) that God measures the heavens with the span of His hand! He stretches out the heavens like you or I would pull a curtain open! If that is the size of the universe, which He fashioned with His little finger (Psalm 8) and upholds by His all-powerful word, how big and awesome and great must this God be?

And to think that this God would create us, and summon us to approach Him in worship and praise! What would be an appropriate way to approach such a Being? Surely with respect, wonder, admiration, awe, amazement, fear and trembling (v.7).

And yet to survey the worship gatherings just in our town today, I wonder if we would find a sense of this wonder in the presence of such greatness? Do we find it here? Or are we just playing games, going through the motions, with this God? What would it communicate about God to our lost world for "His people" to come together and praise Him in such a way that we seem bored? Several years back I came across a quote from Charles Misner, a scientific specialist in general relativity theory, about Albert Einstein's view of Christianity back in the 1940's and '50's. As a preacher it has impacted me greatly, but it applies to more than just preaching:

"I do see the design of the universe as essentially a religious question. That is, one should have some kind of respect and awe for the whole business. . . . It's very magnificent and shouldn't be taken for granted. In fact, I believe that is why Einstein had so little use for organized religion, although he strikes me as a basically very religious man. He must have looked at what the preachers said about God and felt that they were blaspheming. He had seen much more majesty than they had ever imagined, and they were just not talking about the real thing. My guess is that he simply felt that religions he'd run across did not have proper respect . . . for the author of the universe."

What a condemnation from a non-believing man, when we've been entrusted to proclaim the excellencies of this great and glorious God of ours! "God is in heaven and you are on earth"; God is great; do you have a proper respect and awe for the Author of the universe? Could a scientist walk into our worship services and leave having seen much more majesty than we have ever conceived? I pray with all my heart it wouldn't be so. I pray that you would not treat God as a small, insignificant, trivial reality. But that you would give Him the awe and

respect that His unsearchable greatness is worthy of.

Three Symptoms of Vain Worship

So God is great; He is in heaven, you are on earth. The rest of the text warns us of some vain, foolish ways of approaching a God this great, ways that would belittle and obscure His greatness. There are three of them that I want to run through quickly with you.

1. Lack of Preparation

"*Guard your steps* when you go to the house of God..." I think the point is, be careful. Think of what you are about to do. You're not just dropping in on a neighbor for a chit-chat or passing time with a friend. You're going to the place where the almighty Maker of heaven and earth stoops down to meet with you and speak to you. It would be a good idea for you to discuss with your families, small groups, etc. what are some ways that you can intentionally prepare yourself to approach God in corporate worship each week.

For now, let me offer one thought that some of us have been observing for a long time: one symptom of a lack of preparation is a failure to be here and seated on time. I'm not trying to be an oppressive legalist, and I am well aware that there are unforeseen, uncontrollable circumstances that sometimes cause you to be late. I'm not trying to be the clock police and make you paranoid about showing up five minutes late.

But if it's a regular habit to be running late, I'd simply ask you to consider what that communicates about the value of the God we worship. If you're a big U2 fan, you're not showing up 10 minutes after the band has taken the stage Thursday night. If you're a big Phillies fan, you're not showing up in the bottom of the 2nd inning. If you're a fan of the new blockbuster movie, you don't walk in fifteen minutes after the movie started. We want to maximize our time in the presence of greatness; we don't want to miss a minute. And if we are "big fans"

of God, I think we'll make being here on time a priority. But again, I'm not trying to beat you up or play Holy Spirit for you. You consider these things, pray about them, and see what God says to you.

2. Coming to give instead of coming to get

Maybe you thought I said that backwards, because what I said might be counterintuitive, but I meant it like I said it: "To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they are doing evil. ²Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God...let your words be few." So when you approach God, come to hear Him, not to do work for Him.

In other words, come to receive from Him rather than giving something to Him. Because it would be foolish, wouldn't it, for you who is on earth to approach the One who is in heaven as though you were going to give Him something that He needed? He has no needs! So if you come to worship Him with a mindset that thinks you can bring Him something that He needs, then you're offering the sacrifice of fools.

You don't have anything to offer Him, do you? You come in here dead, and discouraged, and frustrated and burdened, you come in here hungry and thirsty in your souls, bankrupt and empty and needy, and when you come to Him like that and throw your hands up towards Him and say, "O God, fill me!", and you shut your mouths and listen to His Word, then God will get glory from you by your running towards Him to fill you. What a picture of God's grace to us this is...you just sitting there with your mouths shut receiving the good news of a God who has done everything necessary to fill and satisfy your souls!

You worship in vain if you come here thinking that your attendance or your singing or your money will make you right with God; you don't have to paste on smile and act like you have it all together to present something wonderful to God. And the kind of worship that happens with that mindset pervading will be lifeless and dry and empty and

worthless. But if you come hungry and thirsty for His fullness -- "1As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God", the stream isn't getting anything from the deer, it's the deer who is receiving -- then He will be honored, and our services will burst with life. All you need to please Him this morning is need.

3. Making promises you don't intend to keep

But worship is about much more than Sunday services, right? This gathering is to be like gasoline poured on your soul, igniting a fire of passion for Christ in you that propels you out into the world with burning affection for Jesus and His mission. And so this text moves on from what we do in the house of God to how it impacts us in the 22/6:

"4When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow. 5It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. 6Let not your mouth lead you into sin, and do not say before the messenger that it was a mistake." This is a word for those who show up happily enough to worship, listen with half an ear, with no real intention of following through on the commitments he's made to God. Those words are no more real than a daydream.

You've been there, haven't you? The words of a song fill you with fresh resolve, a part of the message is used by the Spirit to bring conviction and you think, "That's it, I really need to commit to...I really need to confess and repent of..." And then when the emotion of the moment is gone, so is your resolve. You sang "Speak, O Lord," but do you really mean that? Or is it empty, vain ritual (Matt.15)?

The One Who Paid it All

If we're honest, I think we would say we've fallen short numerous times on all three of these points. We have worshiped the way of the fool, and that arouses God's anger: "Why should God be angry at your voice

and destroy the work of your hands?" But this is not a word of gloom and doom. There is a sense in which each week I want to make you feel lost all over again, so that you would experience the sweetness and thrill and pleasure of the salvation that is ours in Christ.

Ecclesiastes is a book that raises questions that can be answered only by the gospel of Jesus Christ. In this text, the question is: How can people who have failed so miserably to honor and praise a God so great ever have hope of escaping the fury of His destructive anger? The answer is that the God who is in heaven chose in His grace to come down and provide the rescue that we need:

"⁵Christ Jesus, ⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."

In the person of Jesus Christ, God came down from His heavenly throne and took upon Himself the awful weight of our sin, and the cross He paid the debt that we owe to God for our failure to love and worship and obey Him. Whereas time and time again we have failed to pay what we owe to God, we have made promises that we've failed to keep, we've placed greater value on rock concerts and sporting events and clothes and movies and possessions and houses and children and spouses than on Him, the Author and Giver of every good thing, yet on the cross Jesus has paid it all, and declared, "It is finished," rising triumphant to prove to us once and for all that the check He wrote cleared and really accomplished redemption, forgiveness and reconciliation, so that this God in heaven has become our heavenly Father! That a God so great should regard us at all!

Take a Step

Swimming in that kind of love will purge away our follies and our inconsistencies when it comes to worship. And we will come eager and prepared, and we will come to receive, and we will come longing for His grace and empowering Spirit to work in us hearts of obedience that would demonstrate and declare His infinite worth 22/6, not just in a service. So whatever place you might find yourself in today, look at this grace, trust in this mercy, and take a step of commitment today. Whatever that might mean for you: membership, small group, leadership, conversion. Don't let this moment pass with another empty vow. Rest in Christ's grace, and dive deeper into it today.