

6. True Worship: The Reality of Faith vs the Ritual of Fantasy

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[0 : 00] I'll do turn, if you would, to Ecclesiastes chapter 5. That's page 555 in the Church Bibles. And as you can see, it's a passage all about true worship.

And more particularly, it's about the contrast between the reality of faith and the ritual of mere fantasy in worship.

Last week we saw that the theme in Ecclesiastes chapter 4 was all about living for success. In other words, worshipping success. And that's so easy and it's so common, isn't it?

Whether we define it by public prosperity or private possessions or popular power, as we saw. But we saw that people who live that way, and many people do, and our world around us just demonstrates that so clearly, doesn't it?

When people do live like that, it only leads to oppression. That is, oppression and loss for the have-nots of this world, but also oppressiveness even in gain for those who have.

[1 : 09] The striving miser in chapter 4, verse 8, who has no end to his toil, and yet is just despising his life because he deprives himself of all pleasure.

It's sheer vanity. It's an unhappy business. Or the ambitious ruler who ends the chapter in verse 16, no end of the people that he has to lead, and no end of the burdens that that means.

And at the end of his time, well, they just forget all about him. It's vanity. It's driving after the wind.

But there is a key to life, and it lies not in this fantasy of success chasing, but in the reality of recognizing something far greater, the eternity that is in our hearts, that tells us that there is more to life than just what we see under the sun.

And the key to life is to live for that. That's living in time for eternity. And that's what liberates us for our lives here, in time, on this earth.

And in fact, it's the only way to real joy. That's been the preacher's message all the way through.

But as chapter 4 showed us, you see, so often people don't live like that.

[2 : 27] They suppress the truth about God above. And they do just live for success in this world. They worship success, gain. Or as Jesus put it later on, they serve mammon.

They serve success. And you see, that isn't just a problem for secular people. It's a problem for God's people too. That's why Jesus talks so much about it, isn't it?

You can't serve God and mammon. You can't serve God and worldly success. You can't live for time and for eternity.

You just can't do it. You can't live for earth and for heaven. Either you'll be laying up treasure for one, or you'll be laying up treasure for the other. But you can't lay up treasure for both.

That's what Jesus says. And that's just what the preacher is saying too, in the book of Ecclesiastes.

But the problem is, of course, that many people, many of us, try to do just that, don't we?

[3 : 32] And it is a particular danger for God's people. That's who the preacher is writing to.

Remember, after the exile, the people are back in the land. You read it in Ezra and Nehemiah in the later chapters.

You read about it in Malachi. They're very taken up, the people, with money, with property, with trade, with financial security. And the problem is, you see, that you can be among God's people.

You can think that you are living for heaven, and yet the reality is you can just very well, all the time, be in fact living for gain, for success under the sun, serving mammon.

In other words, you can be very, very religious, and yet at heart you can be absolutely secular.

There's lots of talk about matters above the sun, lots of talk about God, perhaps, and heaven, and the gospel, and so on, but in reality, your heart is in fact fully engaged with life under the sun, just

like the man of the world.

And that's why the challenge of the preacher in Ecclesiastes is not primarily for the total outsider. Many people think it is, but that is not the case.

[4 : 54] It's not the person who has nothing at all to do with the house of God that the writer is writing to, particularly. It's the ones, as chapter 5, verse 1 makes very clear, who are going to the house of God.

It's the people who outwardly, at least, are very pious, very evangelical, very apparently faithful. But in fact, it's all fantasy. They're deceiving others and they're deceiving themselves.

And so just like the Lord Jesus Christ himself, the great preacher, this preacher, Kohelet, takes the spotlight and shines it on God's people to examine them, to examine their worship.

And he's asking us the question, is your worship true worship? In other words, does our worship demonstrate the reality of faith or just the ritual of fantasy?

And that's a very important question, isn't it? Very, very important. Must be because the Bible keeps asking that kind of question all the way through from beginning to end. Well, of course, you see, because it is possible for you to be deluding yourself quite literally to death.

[6 : 11] That's what Jesus says. That's what's at stake. What is at stake is of eternal significance. And if that's the case, we must be clear, mustn't we, between the difference between fantasy and reality.

Well, in chapter 5, verses 1 to 7, the preacher turns the spotlight on us and he says, you'll get a good clue by examining your approach to praise to God.

and your attitude to prayer to God and your actions regarding your promises to God. In each of these areas, he asks you, examine yourself.

Is there reality or is it just ritual? So the first focus of the preacher in verse 1 is on a right attitude to praise. And he tells us that real praise is not about the ritual of offerings, but it's about the reality of obedience.

Guard your steps. Literally, watch out, he says, 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.

[7 : 23] Isn't that a shock? You can think you're going to worship God, but in fact, you're doing the opposite. You're doing evil. Not just non-worship, anti-worship, evil, says the preacher.

And that's a very significant verse. We're having problems with the sound here. You'll just have to bear with us. It's a very significant verse because it tells us something that people often don't grasp at all.

That the first priority for a worshipper is open ears. And it's always been that. It's always been God's first priority that his people should listen to his voice.

That's the very heart of what it means to actually worship God. Not our voices, but his voice. And of course, open ears means we must have an open heart too to obey what we hear.

Now that may surprise us. In our church culture today, most people, when they use that word worship, they really mean singing. Often endlessly or ecstatically.

[8 : 33] But no, that's not what the preacher's talking about, is it? Even way back in the Old Testament, the temple was more about God's voice being heard than about offerings and sacrifices.

Of course, the offerings and the sacrifices were abundant and very much at the heart of temple worship. But the point is that all of that was absolutely worthless unless people had their ears open and their hearts open to God's voice.

obedience because obedience in the Bible always comes before offerings. David knew that. Just read Psalm 51, his great psalm of repentance.

You don't delight in sacrifice or I would give it. You will not be pleased with a burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart, O God.

You will not despise. See? A life that listens to God and obeys God. And that is supremely also the focus of corporate worship in the Bible.

[9 : 37] The very first gathering of the church in the Bible is around Sinai, isn't it? The congregation of God's people, what did they do? They drew near to listen, to hear God's word.

Deuteronomy 5, verse 27, the people said to Moses, Go near and hear all that the Lord our God will say, speak to us all that the Lord will speak to you and we will hear it and do it.

That's the model, the paradigm for the first meeting of church. in the whole Bible. You see, you go near to listen in order to obey. And without that approach to praise, well, all your praise offerings are not just nothing, says the preacher, they're evil.

And that's all through the Bible, all the way through. Proverbs 21, verse 3, to do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice.

That's why the job of the priests and the Levites in the temple was primarily to be teachers of God's word. That was the very heart of religious life in the Old Testament times. You can read it in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, all the laws that were there to ensure that the priests and the Levites' ministries of teaching the people were preserved.

[10:53] so many laws to protect the hearing of God's word. One place that it's exceptionally clear is in Malachi chapter 2 where Levi, we're told, stood in awe of God's name.

True instruction was in his mouth. For, says the Lord, quote, the lips of a priest should guard knowledge and people should seek instruction from his mouth for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts.

And that's what going to the house of God was all about, seeking a word from the Lord of hosts. Obedience is the reality.

Offerings, however flamboyant the praise might be, well, they can be just mere ritual, can't they? And that's not just empty, says God, it's evil, says verse 1.

That was the constant challenge of the prophets, wasn't it? You multiply your offerings but your hearts are far from me, you're not listening to my word, says the Lord. Plenty of praise, plenty of your voice, but no room for God's voice.

[12:08] Plenty of ritual, but precious little reality. And that's just what the preacher is warning about here in these verses, in verse 1 in particular. It's so easy to offer the sacrifices of fools, and that's evil.

It's so deeply ingrained with us, you see, that it's a constant danger. Do you remember back in the Old Testament? Do you remember Saul? Read about it in 1 Samuel 13.

No sooner was he king than he fell into this trap. Do you remember Samuel told him to wait for him to come and Samuel would offer up the offerings and so on? But no, no, Saul knew better.

He decided to be the priest and he would offer up the offerings and sacrifices. When Samuel confronted him, Saul said, I forced myself to do it.

That's the exact words he used. It's very contemporary, isn't it? I forced myself to do it. And Samuel said, you have done foolishly. The offering of fools and it's evil.

[13:11] And God takes that seriously. That led to Saul's downfall. He never learned his lesson. A couple of chapters later in 1 Samuel, he does exactly the same thing virtually. He totally disobeys God's voice.

God tells him to carry out a military campaign in a particular way, doing particular things. But Saul has his own ideas. And this is what Samuel said to him. Why did you not obey the voice of God? Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of God? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice.

And to listen than the fat of rams. You see, do you get the idea? God doesn't want a ritual of offerings. He wants the reality of obedience in the lives of his people.

That's a warning that we all need to hear, isn't it? That's why it's in the Bible. It's not just an Old Testament problem either, is it? Remember Paul's words to Timothy, 2 Timothy 3? In the last days, that's today, that's the days we live in.

[14:19] People will be lovers of self, lovers of money, lovers of pleasure, rather than lovers of God. What does that lead to, says Paul? Well, that always leads to one thing. People who have the appearance of godliness, but denying its power.

You see, no reality. Plenty of offerings, plenty of light praise, but precious little transformation of life, and priorities, and witness, because there's no real obedience.

But God wants obedience, not offerings. And that comes from listening ears, from seeking God's word, not seeking loud extravaganzas of praise.

So, do you have a right approach to praise? What approach did you come to church with today, for example?

Of course, the church building is not a temple, we know that, the temple has gone forever, because Jesus himself now is the place where we meet with God.

[15 : 28] The time has come, as Jesus said, to the woman at the well, when people will worship, not on a certain mountain, or a certain place, but in spirit and in truth through the risen Jesus. We don't go to the temple in that sense, but nevertheless, the New Testament does teach that God's people are a temple.

We are God's temple, Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3. And God takes that very seriously. His temple is holy. And that's especially true when we gather together as his church, Paul says, God is in the midst of us, the presence of Jesus, the power is present.

And so Paul is just as serious, isn't he, about the church's conduct at such times as the preacher is about the conduct of the temple in his time. But I wonder if we are anything like as serious as that. It's a question we have to ask, isn't it? Do we guard our steps? I was reading one writer on Ecclesiastes who spoke about years that he spent as an itinerant preacher while he taught in a college.

And he went around the country to different churches, all of them evangelical churches, to be a guest preacher. And he said that they divided into two clear types of church. The one where it became very obvious that attending Sunday by Sunday was really just a habit, it was a ritual.

[16 : 55] To all intents and purposes, it was social. People came to see their friends, to chat, to get the week's news, to meet with one another. But he said there was very little real sense of a reverent bowing down before God, seeking his voice.

On the other hand, he said there were churches where there was a very different atmosphere, where even from the moment people came through the door, there was a sense of expectancy, and longing for God to speak, and readiness for God to speak.

focus wasn't on people themselves or everybody else, but very clearly upon God, drawing near to listen.

Well, I guess we got some visitors here today. I wonder what you thought when you came into our church. I wonder what you thought before the service, or during the service, or after. Maybe I should ask you on the way out.

But you see, we need to ask ourselves that, don't we? Where's the focus? Is it on one another? Is it on what's going on? Is it on God?

[18 : 06] Is there an expectancy in our heart? Is there a longing? Is there a desire to hear God's voice and to respond in our lives? What about each one of us ourselves?

Did we guard our steps this morning? Did we prepare our hearts? Did we get ready for a serious engagement? With God? Jesus takes that sort of thing very seriously, doesn't he?

Remember in the Sermon on the Mount? Don't go to put your gift on the altar, he says, if your heart isn't right, if you're not reconciled with your brother, if you're harbouring sin in your heart, sort that out first.

Don't draw near to offer the sacrifice of fools. That's what that is. It's not just empty, says the preacher, it's evil. Of course, worship is the whole of our lives, isn't it?

It's not just our corporate gatherings, of course. It's not just about being in God's house now, as New Testament Christians. We are God's house. Every one of us is the temple of the Holy Spirit.

[19 : 13] Far more solemn than Solomon's temple. So the reality of that hearing and obedience must be an attitude that permeates the whole of our life before God, mustn't it?

As well as being an ambience that is present and evident in our corporate gatherings. That is important too. There's not an awful lot of reverence around today, is there?

It's not a characteristic that defines, I would say, the evangelical church. Much less God Almighty today than God Almighty.

reality. But we need to read the New Testament. We need to read Hebrews chapter 12, don't we, if we think that reverence and all was something that went out with the Old Testament.

See to it, says the writer, that you do not refuse him who is speaking from heaven. Remember that at Sinai, when the voice came from the earth and shook the earth, the people were terrified. How much more then will he shake you and everything else who speaks from heaven?

[20 : 25] That's why he says, be careful to offer God acceptable worship with reverence and all, for our God is a consuming fire. That's the image of Jesus, isn't it, in Revelation as he walks between the lampstands of his churches.

It's just a more emphatic New Testament way of saying exactly what the preacher says here in Ecclesiastes 5 1. Watch your step with God. Have a right approach to praise.

God isn't fooled by the ritual of offerings, whether it's sacrifices or songs or suits or whatever it is. Don't let us be fooled.

God wants the reality of obedience, not the ritual of offerings. The second focus in verses 2 to 3 are on a right attitude to prayer, aren't they?

He tells us that real prayer is not about the ritual of rash ramblings to God, but it's about the reality of reverence and reserve. It's just the same theme as verse 1, isn't it?

[21 : 31] The first command to God's people is, hear, O Israel, not speak, O Israel. But when worship is a ritual of fantasy, when we are at the center, not God, when in our fantasy God is actually there to serve us, not us there to serve him, then our words are often to the fore, aren't they?

And they're a dead giveaway. Because God, you see, and therefore prayer to God, has just become another tool in the box for chasing gain, for chasing success in this world.

Isn't that true? Isn't it true that a lot of our prayer, if we're honest, is much more about us than about God? Suppose somebody could overhear your private prayers or mine.

Here's a question. Would they learn more about you or about God? You see, God isn't fooled by that, is it? He hears it all, he sees it all.

And it not only offends him, says the preacher, it bores him to tears, and he says, oh, shut up. Look at verse 2. Don't be rash with your mouth. Don't let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God.

[22 : 43] Let your words be few. For goodness sake, be quiet. It's rather like being at a meeting with an irritating person that just bleats on and on and on, full of their own self-importance about a subject that in fact they don't really know anything about, and everybody else is sitting there looking at their shoes, wishing they would shut up.

I was at a meeting just like that this week. week. That's how God feels about our wrong attitude in our prayers. Weesh, he says, stop these ramblings.

There's no reverence in that. If there was, you'd be much more reserved. You see, that kind of rash rambling in our prayers comes because we're full of ourselves.

That is, our lives and our concerns and our cares are the things that fill our horizons. So we might use a lot of pious language, but God can spot the humbug miles off.

You see, the symptoms are so plain. Look at verse three. Just as dreams and disturbed sleep are a mark of a troubled mind, a mind full of business, of burdens, so in just the same way, that attitude of rash and self-focused words is a sure evidence of a foolish heart, self-deception, of fantasy religion.

[24 : 08] The essence of folly all the way through the book of Ecclesiastes is that you don't grasp reality. That our life is defined by God, not God's life defined by us.

That's fantasy. Verse two says it plainly, doesn't it? He is in heaven, he is transcendent, he's eternal. Well, it's us who are on earth. We're the transient ones, we're the ephemeral ones, it's not the other way around.

And unless you grasp that, you've got no idea at all of what God is really like. And therefore you've got no idea about what life is really like. As John Piper puts it very starkly, it's not about you.

It's about God. It's about his story. See, there's plenty of religion, piety, and evangelical piety included that is all back to front, it's all upside down.

It's a ritual of fantasy because it's a whole attitude of prayer that really is just setting out to try and manipulate God for our ends. That's exactly what Jesus says in Matthew 6, isn't it?

[25 : 23] when you pray, don't heap up empty phrases like the pagans do, for they think they'll be heard for their many words, their ramblings. And Jesus is saying that a lot of pious worshippers are just exactly like pagans, because they don't have any real relationship with God at all.

It's all about getting God to serve us. It's about using God and therefore using our prayers actually as just a tool for us to get on in this world and get the success that we want.

But Jesus says to his followers, don't you be like that. If you really know God, you know that he knows what you need before you even ask him. You don't have to ramble.

You pray like this, our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, reverence. And reserve. You see, it's all about God first of all.

Because he is in heaven and life is about him and prayer is also about him. That's the kind of speaking, you see, that comes from listening. Not from the sacrifice of fools.

[26 : 37] It's reverent, it's real. Because it remembers that God is transcendent and that we are on earth. We are the transient ones. And therefore we know that God's words are infinitely more

important than our words.

So we have a right attitude to prayer, reverence and reserve. Well, I need to ask myself, don't I, is that my attitude in prayer?

So do you. Then the preacher comes to examine in verses 4 to 6 the right actions in response to promises. promises. And he tells us it's not a ritual of promises followed by delay and denial that God wants in response to his word.

No. It's the reality of determined doing in response to his word. See, it's easy to be miles away from reality engaging with God, even right in the heart of what we think we're doing, in church for example, either on our own or when we're gathered together.

But equally, it's easy for the focus to be on our own words. And that can be so, especially if we get taken up with a heady atmosphere of praise or prayer.

[27 : 57] We can easily just be in empty ritual, either ignoring it or responding in a way that's just empty. Rash and emotional overreactions to God, promises to give up everything for God and to go for God and to do for God.

It could be perhaps that sometimes there is a real spiritual breakthrough that we have heard God's word and God has spoken to us and we've learned to listen and we've been convicted and we're challenged and we want to respond.

But even if that is the case, you see, the preacher is still saying to us, watch out. Because often we speak out rashly and we burble out before God, things that we haven't really thought about.

We make promises to God, but the problem is God takes those words of ours very seriously. So if you've made a promise to God, you also need to take it seriously.

That's what the preacher is saying. Verse 4, not delay that he expects from us. Do not delay in paying your vows, for he has no pleasure in fools. Nor is it denial and wriggling out of it.

[29 : 09] Verse 6, don't say before the messenger, oh it was all a mistake, I didn't really mean it, it was a rash moment. No, God will hold you to it. Better never to have made a vow at all, never promised God anything, than to default on it.

You can read about vows in Deuteronomy 23, it speaks about it very clearly. Nobody's compelled to make promises to God, it's quite voluntary. But once you have made a promise to God, well to default on that then is sin.

You see, the problem is that God takes our words very seriously, even if we don't take his words very seriously. It's a matter of integrity, so we must be careful, we must be serious.

Proverbs 14, 3 says, by the mouth of a fool comes a rod for his own back, but the lips of a wise man preserve them. And all the more so when we're dealing with Almighty God and making promises to him.

To make promises and then to delay or to default or ignore them, that scorns God, it's not taking him seriously, it's denying his reality. Of course, when we say promises, it just means all of our speech.

[30 : 27] Jesus was very devastating, wasn't he, about those who tried to make all sorts of loopholes, so a vow wasn't really a vow and all the rest of it. Nonsense, says Jesus. God hears it all. He hears the promises of your hearts too, and he takes you for your word.

And so you better too, you better let your yes just mean yes, let your no just mean no. So friends, we need to be careful, don't we, says the preacher, to make sure that right actions actually follow our words, so they're not just empty words.

Pious words are very easy, aren't they? Lord, yes, I'll be praying for you. We often say that, don't we? Do we always do it?

Well, God hears us say it, and he calls us to account. We need to be careful, it's dangerous to make promises to God. Or maybe after a weekend away, or a stirring message about mission or evangelism, I'll be a missionary overseas for you, Lord.

That's what I'm going to do. Or yes, I will get trained up so I can really share the gospel with people, I promise. Well, God hears you say that, and the preacher says, pay what you vow.

[31 : 47] Or you're convicted and you say, oh God, I'm sorry I've been robbing you, I know I have of my time and my talents, my money. I'll put it right, I promise from this day forward, it will be different.

Well, says the preacher, don't delay, for he has no pleasure in fools. If you're in any doubt about that, read Acts chapter five when you go home, the story of Ananias and Sapphira, made a

voluntary vow to sell their field and give the money to God and held it back.

Oh God, make me holy. Oh God, use me in your service. These things, friends, are very dangerous things to pray, because God hears and he will do it.

But it may be a very costly and painful preparation for you. Be careful, watch your step in what you pray and you promise to God. Be careful in what you sing to God.

Take my life and let it be consecrated, Lord, to thee. That's a dangerous thing to sing in church, because God hears. And it's not delay, it's not denial, it's doing that he expects.

[33 : 02] All to Jesus, I surrender, I surrender all. And God hears. And he waits. And God takes your promises very seriously, so we better too, isn't that right?

That's why, you see, if you're going to go in for religion at all, if you're going to go to the house of God, you better be very careful, because just coming to the house of God isn't enough. In fact, it's a very dangerous thing indeed to come to the house of God.

You need to guard your steps, says the preacher, you need to watch out. You need to be prepared for the right approach to praise, with the right attitude to prayer, with the right actions that follow your promises.

If you're not, then be very, very careful. Don't presume on God. Verse 6. Why should he be angry at your voice and destroy the work of your hands?

That's a real warning to God's people. Be very careful. So we need to ask ourselves, don't we, am I a true worshipper? Is it the reality of faith?

[34 : 10] Or is it just a ritual of fantasy? It's all summed up really, isn't it, in verse 7. It's the contrast between reality and mere ritual and religion. You see, ritual can be very outwardly impressive, can't it?

Very exciting at times, very aesthetically appealing. Impressive dreams, visions, maybe revelations perhaps. Impressive words. Very spiritual, very ethereal, very loud, very spectacular.

But look at verse 6. When dreams increase and words grow many, there is vanity, says the preacher. nature. What matters is something far more basic, far more mundane.

Fearing God. Standing in awe of God, as the NIV puts it. Taking God very, very seriously.

You draw near to listen, and therefore to obey, not to multiply offerings. things. And therefore, your words are few and reverent, not rash and incessant before God.

[35 : 24] And therefore, you don't deny or delay in your response to God, but rather you do what you say you will do in response to God's word. That's reality.

And that's what God wants. I once heard a preacher say that a lot of Christians are all fur coat and no knickers. That is, outwardly, there's apparent wealth and substance, but underneath it's just sheer poverty.

A lot of style and splash. And you get to the heart of it, really nothing more than fantasy. But friends, God isn't fooled.

That's what the preacher's telling us. Then let's fool ourselves either. God is for real. He won't be used, even by his own people. We are his creatures.

He is not our creature. Never forget that. He is on heaven and we are on earth. So we're to stand in awe of God.

[36 : 30] We're to watch our step when we go to the house of God. We're to draw near to listen, not to offer the sacrifice of fools. Fools may, of course, fool themselves and they may fool others for a very long time.

But not forever. And nor do they fool God. Let me finish with the words of another preacher, the preacher, Jesus himself.

the one who came from heaven to earth so that we must hear the words of God. Listen to what he said. Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

On that day many will say to me, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and cast out demons in your name and do many mighty works in your name? And then I will declare to them, I never knew you.

Depart from me, you workers of lawlessness. Therefore, everyone who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock and the rain fell and the floods came and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall because it had been founded on the rock.

[37 : 48] And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. The rain fell and the floods came and the winds blew and beat against that house and it fell.

And great was the fall of it. You see, one day the whole universe will see the vast gulf that there is between the reality of true faith and the ritual of tragic fantasy in religion.

God, in his gospel, calls us to see that difference now and to flee from the one to the other before it's too late and to make sure that we are those who guard our steps when we go to the house of God, who draw near to listen and to do and not offer the sacrifice of fools.

Thank you not for the sacrifice of fools. Thank you.