

Keeping Your Vows

Ecclesiastes 5:1-7

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Many years ago, Beth and I attended a large church in another community. On that particular day, as a way to celebrate the start of summer, a number of members came running on to the platform holding beach balls which they simultaneously launched into the congregation. We were instructed to keep the balls in the air by not letting them hit the ground during the singing time.

We started looking for the exits but were trapped in the middle of a row. Apparently, this is a fairly common practice because we found similar videos online. Here's a brief clip.

While there's nothing wrong with rejoicing in what God has done, this goes way too far because we're called to be reverent in light of who He is.

As we learned last week, we've been wired for relationships. We were challenged to *be intentional about connecting with others because we are made for community*. Many of you put this into practice after the service by reaching out to people you didn't know. When I called one of our guests this week, she remarked that an Edgewood member came up and introduced herself and then invited her to one of our Growth Groups. She went to the group and said she loved it. Let's keep reaching out to people.

I was also very humbled by the participation in the prayer walks at schools last Sunday night. My guess is we had Edgewood prayer warriors at 15 different schools! Jessica Lang, who prayed with her husband Patrick and daughter Emma at two different schools, posted this: "*We walked around the schools, touching every entrance, praying for the students and staff who walk through those doors every day...*"

Beth and I love Edgewood and what God is doing here for His glory! Let's continue praying Psalm 85:6: "***Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you.***"

Pastor Chad opened our service by reading Ecclesiastes 5:1-7, reminding us of the importance of being reverent when we gather together. Let me draw our attention

to the beginning and the ending of this passage: ***“Guard your steps when you go to the house of God...God is the one you must fear.”***

Let’s make a couple observations.

- In contrast to chapter 4, where God’s name is not used at all, God is referenced by name six times in seven verses in this passage. In fact, this is the highest concentration of God’s name in the entire book of Ecclesiastes.
- Solomon has been using the pronouns “I,” “me,” and “myself” throughout the book. Now, for the first time, he uses the second person “you” and “your” to communicate imperatives for each of us to follow.

The mood changes from sharing what Solomon had learned the hard way to preaching to others, so we don’t have to learn the hard way. I’m reminded of the story of two women who were sitting together in the front row of a church listening to a fiery preacher. When he condemned the sin of stealing, they cried out at the tops of their lungs, *“AMEN, BROTHER.”* When the preacher condemned the sin of lust, they shouted again, *“PREACH IT, REVEREND.”* When he condemned the sin of lying, they jumped to their feet and exclaimed, *“RIGHT ON, BROTHER, TELL IT LIKE IT IS!”* But when the preacher condemned the sin of gossip, the two became very quiet. One turned to the other and said, *“He’s done quit preaching and now he’s meddlin’!”*

This sermon may meddle with you today. It’s already done that for me. Here’s what I’m hoping we learn: *Be on guard when you worship God by drawing near to revere Him.*

I see five urgent imperatives.

1. Be careful when you go to worship. Verse 1 begins with a warning: ***“Guard your steps when you go to the house of God...”*** The word ***“guard”*** has the idea of *“paying close attention and watching carefully over.”* In Numbers 1:53, we read, ***“The Levites shall keep guard over the tabernacle of the testimony.”*** The word ***“steps”*** refers to our conduct or behavior. Literally, we’re to *“ponder the path of our feet.”* Solomon is calling us to tiptoe into the presence of God, doing so with care and caution.

As I was reflecting on this verse this week, I kept thinking of “caution tape,” which is put up to keep people from something dangerous or hazardous to their health. This bright yellow tape is designed to warn us about something, to tell us to

proceed with caution. In a similar way, God is not to be trifled with. One pastor put it this way: *“Sometimes I think that all religious sites should be posted with signs reading, ‘Beware the God.’”* We’re called to be intentionally humble when we come before an incredibly holy God.

Consider these examples.

- When God appeared to Moses in the burning bush, He said these words in Exodus 3:5: ***“Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.”***
- Nadab and Abihu were vaporized when they didn’t guard their steps in the presence of God according to Leviticus 10:1-2: ***“Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it and laid incense on it and offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, which He had not commanded them. And fire came out from before the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD.”***
- In Malachi 1:10, when people were bringing sick sacrifices to God, He told them to shut it all down and not even bother going through the motions: ***“Oh that there were one among you who would shut the doors, that you might not kindle fire on my altar in vain! I have no pleasure in you, says the LORD of hosts, and I will not accept an offering from your hand.”***

R.C. Sproul writes, *“A God who is all love, all grace, all mercy, no sovereignty, no justice, no holiness, and no wrath is an idol.”*

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2. Come to listen. We see this in the second half of verse 1: ***“...to draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they are doing evil.”*** God wants us to draw near in order to hear and heed what He has to say. To that point, the Hebrew meaning of ***“listen”*** carries with it the idea of obedience.

The NLT translates verse 1 this way: ***“As you enter the house of God, keep your ears open and your mouth shut. It is evil to make mindless offerings to God.”*** We need to keep our ears open because listening is more important than what kind of sacrifices we give. In Psalms 40:6, we read: ***“In sacrifice and offering you have not delighted, but you have given me an open ear.”*** Do you have an open ear to hear what God is saying?

This is illustrated by Mary's posture before Jesus in Luke 10:39, "***who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching.***" Martha, on the other hand, was scurrying around and became distracted, even presuming to direct Jesus to rebuke her sister. The answer Jesus gave to her in verses 41-42 is a word of correction for us as well: "***But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken from her.'***"

Phillip Ryken writes: "*Understand that whenever we go to worship, we enter the presence of a holy God who has gathered His holy people to hear His holy Word.*" God must be the focal point of worship, not self. The Word of God must take priority, not the words of the worshiper.

I want you to know that preaching God's Word at Edgewood is a holy and humble privilege. I've never been in a church that is so attentive and responsive to the Bible. So many of you are taking notes with your Bibles open as you come reverently and expectantly each week. If you want to be encouraged by how God is using His Word for His glory, check out this week's 4G podcast featuring a new believer named Terry Van Opdorp, who often comes to two services on a weekend because he's so hungry for Bible teaching. When I think of the Edgewood family, my mind goes to Isaiah 66:2: "***But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word.***"

I've been undone this week by a couple passages which reveal how God feels about half-hearted worship.

- Isaiah 1:12: "***When you come to appear before me, who has required of you this trampling of my courts?***"
- Amos 5:21-24: "***I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.***"

BTW, if you desire to grow in your understanding of the Old Testament, the Gospel Project class will be starting the Book of Genesis on Sunday, September 1st at 9:00 a.m. on the lower level.

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3. Be concise with your words. We're to watch how we walk into worship, we're to make sure we're listening, and we're to be careful about what comes out of our mouths according to verses 2-3: ***“Be 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. For a dream comes with much business, and a fool’s voice with many words.”***

I chuckle when I think of what Peter said during the Transfiguration of Jesus. He should have been silent in that holy moment, but instead he said these empty words in Mark 9:5-6: ***“And Peter said to Jesus, ‘Rabbi, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.’ For he did not know what to say, for they were terrified.”*** I need to learn to put a muffler on my mouth, and my guess is you do, too.

When I remember that He is God and I am not, I’m much more careful with my words. I want to be more like Job when he declared in Job 40:4-5: ***“Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth. I have spoken once, and I will not answer; twice, but I will proceed no further.”***

Proverbs 10:8 says: ***“The wise of heart will receive commandments, but a babbling fool will come to ruin.”*** Jesus tells us to use an economy of words when we pray in Matthew 6:7: ***“And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words.”***

At its core, listening involves yielding, which is why it’s so hard for some of us.

4. Be careful with your promises. We see this in verses 4-6: ***“When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow. It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. Let not your mouth lead you into sin, and do not say before the messenger that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry at your voice and destroy the work of your hands?”***

According to Smith’s Bible Dictionary, a vow *“is a solemn and serious pledge to God to perform, or to abstain from performing a certain thing.”* The earliest mention of a vow is found in Genesis 28:20-22 when Jacob vowed to give God a ***“full tenth”*** (a tithe) if God would protect and provide for him. Jephthah made a rash vow by promising to sacrifice whoever first met him when he returned home (Judges 11:30). That didn’t work out so well for him as stated in Judges 11:35:

“For I have opened my mouth to the Lord, and I cannot take back my vow.”
Hannah vowed to give her son to the Lord if she got pregnant (1 Samuel 1:11).

While vow making is not commanded in Scripture, once a vow is made, it is mandatory to keep it. We see this in Numbers 30:2: ***“If a man vows a vow to the LORD, or swears an oath to bind himself by a pledge, he shall not break his word. He shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth.”***

Deuteronomy 23:21 says it even stronger: ***“If you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not delay fulfilling it, for the LORD your God will surely require it of you, and you will be guilty of sin.”***

If you’re married, you have made solemn vows before God, to your spouse, and in the presence of others. God expects you to keep your vows as stated in Malachi 2:14: ***“Because the Lord was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant.”*** Psalm 50:14 says, ***“Perform your vows to the Most High.”*** We’re to be men and women of our word by keeping His Word,

A couple weeks ago, Dave Kraft urged me to preach on marriage because he thinks couples could use some help. I love watching how Dave and Patty hold hands and work at their marriage. This week, he sent me some marriage advice that I’d like to pass along: *“I believe the best marriage advice is to always treat your spouse like the gift from God that they are, especially guys like us who know God gave us a serious upgrade, better than we deserve.”* When I asked Dave if I could quote him, he remarked, *“It’s hard to believe a pastor would ever use something I did or said as a good example. Proves there’s hope for everyone.”*

Friends, it’s a dangerous thing to make promises to God and not keep them. When you dedicate your children to the Lord and vow to evangelize and disciple them, and bring them to church, it’s a dangerous thing not to follow through. When you get baptized and publicly declare you belong to Christ but behave as if you don’t, it’s a dangerous thing. When you join a church and don’t give of your time, talents, and treasures, it’s a dangerous thing.

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5. Commit to reverent obedience. The key to this passage is found in verse 7: ***“For when dreams increase and words grow many, there is vanity; but God is the***

one you must fear.” The whole topic of dreams needs some correcting and clarifying.

- Don’t base your decisions on a dream you may have had after eating too many late-night nachos.
- God has spoken to people in dreams in the Bible and He continues to do so. We hear reports of Muslims having dreams about Christ today.
- God is not obligated to make your dreams and desires come true simply because you claim it to be so.

Actually, our problem is not with our ears or our mouths or with our dreams; our issue is our eyesight. In order to listen better, talk less, and stop chasing our own dreams, we need to see God as big and mighty and revere Him. This is what we read at the end of verse 7: “...**but God is the one you must fear.**” We’ve defined this before as “*trembling trust*” or “*reverent obedience.*”

One pastor writes, “*People are starving for the greatness of God. But most people would not give this diagnosis of their troubled lives...preaching that does not have the aroma of God’s greatness may entertain for a season, but it will not touch the hidden cry of the soul: ‘Show me thy glory!’*”

I heard an example of how reverence for God affected Kenna Freymann, one of our recent high school graduates. She made the decision to quit a job she loved because they kept scheduling her to work on Sundays and it was keeping her from gathering with God’s people. Because of her awe of the Almighty, she was willing to pay this price in order to give priority to worship.

In Exodus 1:17, the fear of God prevented the midwives from taking the lives of babies: “***But the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live.***” I’m convinced if more people today lived in awe of Almighty God, there would be fewer abortions.

Since Ecclesiastes 5:1-7 gripped me this week, I decided to read this passage to the pastoral team on Tuesday. After a sweet time of prayer, we concluded that we need to revere God *and* rejoice in Him. It’s OK to dress casually but not to be casual with God. We’re to be in awe of Him and to cherish our intimacy with Him. We’re to hallow His name because He reigns in Heaven, and we can approach Him with confidence because He invites us to call Him Father. Pastor Dan spoke for each of us when he said, “*My heart wants to burst with joy because my Savior took all of my sins and forgave every one of them.*”

I concluded our time with a reminder of what the Book of Hebrews teaches. Hebrews 12:28-29 says, “...*let us offer to God acceptable worship with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.*” In other words, there will be no beach balls during our worship services. But let’s also remember, because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, born again believers can come with joyful confidence right into His presence as we read in Hebrews 4:16: “*Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*”

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Let’s summarize what we’ve learned today:

- Be careful when you come to worship.
- Come to listen.
- Be concise with your words.
- Be careful with your promises.
- Commit to reverent obedience.

Putting It Into Practice

Here are some ways we can put this into practice.

1. Instead of coming to church to worship, come worshipping to church.

Prepare the night before. Go to bed early. Read your Bible and pray before you come. Pick up the sermon notes. Come early and prepare yourself to meet with our holy God.

2. Grow in your reverence of God. Do you want to experience victory over sin in your life? Then grow in the fear of God. We need to recapture how mighty and majestic God really is because when our understanding of God’s immensity slips, we allow other things to overshadow Him. Instead of praising Him, we end up living for our own pleasure. A.W. Tozer nailed it when he declared, “*What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.*” Exodus 20:20: “...*for God has come to test you, that the fear of Him may be before you, that you may not sin.*” Read Isaiah 1, Isaiah 6, and Malachi 1 this week.

3. Attend the Holy Sexuality Conference. Since God is holy, you and I are called to be holy in every area of our lives. In order to equip us to live and minister in a culture that is confused about sexuality and gender issues, we have invited Dr. Christopher Yuan to speak at our Holy Sexuality Conference on Saturday, October 5th. He will also be preaching in all three services that weekend.

While the topic of sexual identity is a huge issue for teens and young adults, this topic affects everyone of us. Dr. Yuan's mother is also coming and will be leading a breakout session for parents and grandparents who are crushed because of the choices their children and grandchildren are making. Another reason to attend is to be equipped so we know how to share the gospel in a sexually confused culture.

You can register on the website or app, or by stopping by the table in the south lobby. Nearly 100 people have already registered and we're capping registration at 500, so sign-up today.

In the book by C. S. Lewis called *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, after learning that Aslan (the Christ-figure) is a lion, Susan replies:

“Ooh...Is he—quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.”
“That you will, dearie, and make no mistake,” said Mrs. Beaver, *“if there’s anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they’re either braver than most or else just silly.”* Lucy responded, *“Then he isn’t safe?”* To which Mr. Beaver said, *“Safe? Who said anything about safe? ‘Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.”*

Properly understood, the fear of the Lord is the fuel for missions. In addition, Psalm 67:4 tells us we're to take the gospel cross-culturally so ***“the nations will be glad and sing for joy!”*** Let's hear now from our 5th missions trip this summer.

Mexico Report