

# Going to the House of God in a Fallen World



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Ecclesiastes 5:1–7

## Scripture

***"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. 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. 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? For when dreams increase and words grow many, there is vanity; but God is the one you must fear."***

I don't know about you, but as I have been listening to Kory preach through these first four chapters in the Book of Ecclesiastes, and then I began to read chapter 5, there seems to be a change in Solomon's tone. There seems to be a change in atmosphere. Instead of him just reflecting on how the world is fallen, he's now going to talk about those of us who go to the house of the Lord and he's going to give us advice. He lays down three principles about what should happen in our lives as we go to the house of the Lord in a fallen world. We are going to try to present those three thoughts this morning, keeping in mind that these seven verses are talking about going to the house of God in a fallen world.

The first thing Solomon said is guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Guard your steps. Watch your steps. As you approach the house of God and get ready to go into the house of God, the temple that stood in Jerusalem where God's presence was manifested, Solomon said watch your step. Guard how you walk; guard how you step into the presence of God.

Now I don't know why, but when I began to read this passage this week I couldn't get off my mind when Celisa and I went to Scotland for our 25th wedding anniversary in 2005. Before we went to Scotland, we went to England and while we were there, we got to spend about three days in London. Being a Dexter kid, one of my favorite parts of being in London was going into the Underground, getting on a train, and then zipping to another part of London. Now, the first time I went on the Underground and I went through the turnstile, there was this big sign on the wall that said MIND THE GAP. In all of my years being raised in Dexter, I had never heard the phrase "mind the gap." Since we were there early there was no one standing in front of us, so we were the first in line waiting for the train to stop. When I looked down, I noticed that phrase, MIND THE GAP, was in several places all along the edge of the platform. When that train came in and stopped, the train doors opened right where those signs were on the platform. By now, I have figured it out. See, what they were telling me was while I might feel safe on this platform, there is going to be a danger to me when I get ready to step on that train because there is a gap between the platform and the train. Now, we would say in America, "Watch your step," but in England they say, "Mind on the gap," in other words, get

your mind on the gap. I noticed that as you looked on down the platform, that gap was different from one end of the platform to other end. In some of the train stations, the platform was actually straight but the train track was a little on a curve, so there could be as much as twelve to fourteen inches of gap between the platform and the train where the track curved. What they are trying to tell me is I am in a danger zone and I need to be careful. I need to keep my mind focused on this gap so that when I take my step I don't fall into the gap but I step over it into the safety of the train. Does that make sense? Now I have to be honest with you, I never thought when I went into the Underground that I was in a danger zone.

Solomon is saying to the children of Israel, when you go to the house of God, you better watch your step. You better guard how you walk. Do you know why? Because you are in a danger zone. You are going to be stepping into the presence of God, so in other words, you better mind the gap. There is a big gap, a big difference between being in your house and now being in His house. His house speaks about who He is. And here's what the Old Testament is going to reveal to us about God — He's holy, holy, holy. Do you remember Isaiah 6? King Uzziah has died and Isaiah goes to the temple to mourn the death of the king, and he sees the Lord sitting on His throne high and lifted up and the train of His robe fills the temple. He sees six-wing creatures. With two wings they cover their feet, with two wings they cover the face, and with two wings they fly. But the emphasis of Isaiah is on their speech. They are arranged in a heavenly choir and one side is singing to the other side — "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of host." And then the other side responds back — "the whole earth is full of His glory!" Then the other side sings again — "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of Host!" They sing this back and forth to each other in the presence of God. The only attribute of God ever elevated to the third superlative is His holiness. Wow! When you step into the house of the Lord, you are not stepping into the presence of a God who is holy but a God who is holy, holy, holy! Isaiah is trying to capture the transcendence of God. He is in a class all by Himself, He is the holy other One, He is beyond time, in time and outside of time at the same time! Here is what Solomon is trying to say — yes, you live in a fallen world, but when you come to worship God in His house in a fallen world, you better put your

hard hat on because you are literally entering into the presence of God. Mind the gap if you are going to go to the house of the Lord in a fallen world.

And then, Solomon says it's better to listen than to offer the sacrifice of fools, "for they do not know they are doing evil." And then if I could paraphrase, he says don't let your mouth get you in trouble. Watch what your heart's going to say for God is in Heaven, you are on the Earth, so let your words be few...whoa. So if we are going to go to the house of God in a fallen world we first of all mind the gap, but secondly, according to Solomon, we need to open our ears and close our mouths. You don't come to the house of God to do; you come to the house of God to listen. Now, I don't know about you, but I have always read my Old Testament and kind of had this thought that when they went to the house of God and they offered a sacrifice, God accepted their sacrifice, and that kept them in a right relationship with God. But evidently that wasn't the primary reason you went to the temple. You didn't go to the temple to sacrifice, especially to make the sacrifice of fools. The scholarly world is not a hundred percent sure what this phrase "sacrifice of fools" means, but most likely it refers to people who regularly went to the house of God and took their sacrifice, but their heart wasn't in it. They were just going through the motion, so to speak, they were doing a physical thing. They were bringing what they thought God required of them, but their thought wasn't in it, their mind wasn't in it, their heart wasn't in it. So it was considered a sacrifice of fools, to the point that the people who are regularly worshiping in the temple, Solomon says, are doing evil and they don't even know it. Can you imagine bringing a sacrifice to God that you thought was what God wanted and made you right with Him, and then God looks down on and says it's sin, it's evil, and He rejects it? So here is what Solomon says — when you go to the house of God, go to listen. Go to listen and zip it...wow. This is harsh!

Why would Solomon say this? Because he reminds us that God is in Heaven and we are on the Earth. Whoa! There is a big, big difference in who God is, the Creator, and who we are, the creature. So when we go to His house, it's not about us. When we go to His house, it's about Him. And we go to His house to listen to Him. Now why should we listen to Him?

Because He has a different view of the fallen world than we have. He has the heavenly view; we have the earthly view. Now, when I was reading this I couldn't help think about that verse where Isaiah in the 55th chapter, verses 8–9, talks about God saying to Israel, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." Wow! I know we know this to be true, but let's just think about this in concrete terms. God says His thoughts and His ways are as much higher than mine and yours as the heavens are above the earth.

Now, you have to remember that at this time the children of Israel believed in what was called a three-storied universe. The first story of the universe was earth and what we would call the atmosphere. The second story was what we would call outer space where the moon and stars were. Then the third was Heaven where God lived. So God is saying my thoughts and my ways are as far apart as where you live in the first story of the universe to where I live in the third story of the universe. That's pretty far apart, amen? I look up at the moon and sometimes it looks like you just reach out and touch it. But on average, it is two hundred thirty-eight thousand, eight hundred and fifty-five miles from here...wow! That's a long way. The sun, on average, is ninety-four million miles away. Have you seen all those other suns out there in the sky at night? You can't even count them! If I'm correct, we don't measure some of those stars in miles; we measure them in light years. Light travels at the speed of one hundred eighty-six thousand miles per second. If you do the math (I can't give you all the numbers, but I can round it up), light travels nearly five point nine trillion miles a year, and we measure stars in light years. I pulled up a site on the internet that talked about the vastness of the universe — I am not even going to tell you how many millions of light years apart it is! It is mind blowing!

I know you are not going to like this, but here's what God says through Solomon — when you come to my house, zip it. Don't come to my house to tell others what you know; come to my house to hear from me. Come to hear me speak to you through my Word through my messenger. And

please don't let your mouth, in my presence, get you into trouble. And then, he talks about something that we don't fully understand. I don't know that I have a grasp of it, but he compares somebody who works hard having dreams to someone who is a fool who speaks many words. This is in Hebrew parallelism, which means this second part is referring to that first part, for clarity.

I remember being in AG class at Calloway County High School and My AG teacher, Mr. Eugene Cheney, used to say this quite regularly to us. He would say, "It's better to be thought a fool than to open one's mouth and remove all doubt." That's kind of what Solomon is saying...you better be careful when you come to the house of God because God's thoughts, God's ways are so much higher than yours than when you open your mouth you are going to reveal you are a fool. And if you open your mouth a lot, you are going to really reveal who you are. Here is the thought — fools are bringing sacrifices and they don't even know that what they are sacrificing to God isn't making them right with Him; it's revealing the wrong with Him...wow. Can you imagine living in a fallen World in Solomon's day and being able to go to the house of the Lord and be doing things that look one way on the outside but wasn't revealing what was really true on the inside? Mind the gap, open your ears, close your mouth.

In verses 4–7, Solomon says to do what you say you are going to do. There was something about coming to that magnificent temple that Solomon built, entering into the presence of the Lord with other fellow worshipers and having an emotional experience, an intellectual experience, where you wanted to do something for God and then you would stand up and make it known before others of what you were going to do for God. But then go back home and by mid-week you had no plans to fulfill the vow you made to God. Solomon says it would be better when you come to church if you didn't even make a vow. It would be better if you would come to church and not even say you are going to do something than to say you are going to do something and then not do it. He says you don't want the messenger to remind you that you haven't kept your vow. So imagine you are in the house of God, the messenger no doubt is probably referring to a priest, and a priest knows that you have made a commitment

to God, and now months have passed and you have not kept your commitment. And now, the message comes up to you and says, "Oh, yes, by the way, didn't you promise you would do this to God? You still haven't done it. It's time to pay up." Then you try to make an excuse for why you told God you would do whatever you said you were going to do and you are now not doing it. Then Solomon basically says your mouth got you in trouble again. It has led you to say you would do something that you had no intention of doing and you can't do. And now because of your voice, God is going to do something to the work of your hands — He's not going to bless what you are going to do outside the temple and it's all your fault because you didn't do what you said you would do! So just do what you say you are going to do when you come in the presence of God.

Then Solomon closes with this, "...but God is the one you must fear." What we are supposed to do is fear God, have an awe of God, have a respect for God. See, Solomon knew that he had built that house for God, and now he's observing worship, not of people who went occasionally but people who went regularly — and he saw that when they came into God's house it wasn't about God's house; it was about them. It wasn't about God; it was about them. God wasn't on their heart, God wasn't on their mind; they were on their heart, they were on their mind, and there was no fear of God. There was no respect for God. There was no awe of God. There was no trembling in the presence of God. Can you imagine going to the house of God in a fallen world? So Solomon says mind the gap, open your ears, close your mouth, and do what you say you are going to do.

Twenty-three minutes and fifty-one seconds is how much time we have left, and that's the sermon. We almost have time to preach a second sermon. Because here is my dilemma — nothing I just said to you that Solomon said works on this side of the cross, because we don't go to the house of God. I have been preaching that for years...we don't go to church; we are the church. So I have twenty-two minutes and thirty-two seconds to come up with a whole other title to a whole new sermon. Here's the title: *Being* the church, *being* the house of God in a fallen world. For see, we have the privilege this morning of not just looking at the book of Ecclesiastes from Solomon's point of view from that side of the cross, we

can look at his words from this side of the cross and realize we don't go to church; we are the church. The church is the house of God. All of those stories in the Old Testament, all of those prophecies about God raising up someone to build a house wasn't referring to David, it wasn't referring to Solomon, and it wasn't referring to Zerubbabel, but it was referring to His Son Jesus Christ whom He would send in the world to build His house! And His house isn't made of stone, marble, and wood. His church, His house is built of believers, both Jews and Gentiles who have had the middle wall of partition broken down. What you and I need to think about now is not going to the house of God, but *being* the house of God. So what would Solomon say to us? He would say watch your step, mind the gap. We are the church; we are supposed to be straight. But many of the people we encounter aren't straight; they are crooked. So, do you know what ought to happen when someone comes into our presence? They ought to have to mind the gap. Do you get it? There is a difference between your life and those people who are not part of the church. The difference is not going to be as great as between God and us, but the difference still should be great. Why? Because God is holy, holy, holy, and therefore, His house should be holy. Yes, God and Jesus are in Heaven, Jesus being at the right hand throne of God, but where is the third person of the Triune God? In us! We are His house, we are His temple — He is holy, therefore *we* should be holy! We can't dumb down who we are to influence a lost world, we must be who God's made us, and there will be a gap. People living around us will realize there is a danger when they come into our presence because when they come into our presence, they are not just coming into the presence of us they are coming into the presence of God, who is holy, holy, holy! There should be a difference between the life of the person who's been set free from the power of sin and has been transformed from a sinner into a saint of God and the person who is still bound in sin and is a sinner and it's his nature to sin. There should be a radical difference. We can't make God who is holy, holy, holy common! He has already revealed who He is through a Man, and he was holy, holy, holy too. Tempted to sin like us, yet did not. And now He's in Heaven and we are on the earth, and we are His body. So you need to mind the gap. You need to focus on how your life and my life should be different from those who do not know



Christ. We are not talking about how we act when we gather. Yes, it ought to be holy when we gather, but we don't gather that much. We live scattered a lot. It is while we are scattered, living in the presence of those who do not know Christ, that we realize who we are; we are God's house. We are God's church. We should mind the gap.

Secondly, if I can borrow from James and impose James's words on Solomon — let's be quick to listen and slow to speak. There is a time to speak but our words can't be flesh-centered, our words can't be about us, our words can't be our thoughts, our words must be God's thought. We have tried to build the gathering of God's saints as the church around the preaching/teaching of His Word. We are not criticizing others who do this differently, but it's why we don't just choose random thoughts each Sunday. We choose books of the Bible, we stay in those books, and we interpret those books verse by verse because we want to preach God's Word not our words. But we don't just do that when we gather; we got to do that when we scatter. We have to be listening, listening to God speak to us through His Word, not through an experience, not through just what somebody else says, but what His Word says to us. We need to be quick to listen. We want to be doer of the Word, and if we are going to be a doer the Word, we have to know the Word. As Christ's body, as the temple of the Holy Spirit, when we recognize we are in the presence of the Lord, let's be quick to listen to Him. Let's be slow when we speak back.

Can I also say this? There's another dimension to being the house of God. And being the house of God just isn't about Him; it's about them (unbelievers), and we need to listen to them too and be slow to speak. Have you ever noticed that when you are talking people don't think you are listening to them? Have you ever had anybody just look you in the face and say, "Could you just hush for a minute?" have you ever been in that real close relationship where somebody just said, "Shut up! You aren't hearing a word I'm saying!" I think that's how many people out in the world feel. We don't get it. We don't understand. Oh, we think we understand, we think we get it, and we think we have the answer, and we want to tell them the answer but we don't want to take time to listen to the problem! We don't want to take time to hear them tell us about their

scars and their baggage and the bondage and the brokenness. So if we are going to be the house of God, we need to be quick to listen to God but we need to be quick to listen to the world. And then as we listen, when we speak, we don't speak our word, we speak God's Word. Why do we want to speak God's Word? Because His ways and His thoughts are so much higher than ours. We are not going to the house of God; we are the house of God, so mind the gap, be quick to listen, and slow to speak.

Thirdly in closing, do your part. The commitment we should make is to recognize that God made me a part of His body and all He requires of me is to do my part — just be the best part I can be. If you are the foot, you don't have to be the hand. If you are a hand, you don't have to be a knee. If you are in knee, you don't have to be an elbow. You just have to be a part. Are you doing your part? Are you being the best part you can be? You can't live your life isolated from being part of something bigger than you, and that's a body, the body of Christ, the house of God. Paul would tell us that each one of us have been given a spiritual gift. At the moment of our salvation in Christ, the Holy Spirit of God gave us a spiritual gift. That gift wasn't given to us for our edification, but it was given for the edification of the body of Christ. We have a spiritual ministry. We have a place or places to use that spiritual gift on behalf of the body of Christ inside the walls, outside the walls, when it's gathered, when it's scattered. We have a spiritual enabling. The Holy Spirit is going to take us with our giftedness in our place of ministry and then He has a spiritual enabling that He has given us. Some of us would just influence a few, some of us will influence hundreds, and some of us will influence thousands. That has nothing to do with us; that has everything to do with God. I don't worry about those things. You shouldn't worry about those things. All we should worry about is doing our part. That's all you have to do, your part. When you do your part and I do my part, we do our part and we display the manifested presence of Christ to the community in which we live. Wow!

So in this fallen world, I just need to mind the gap, be quick to listen, slow to speak, and do my part. You can do this. I can do this. We can be who God has called us to be because we have been redeemed from this fallen world in which we live.