

Sunday School Lesson
Eccl. 5:1-7
 by Lorin L. Cranford
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Approaching God



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Quick Links to the Study

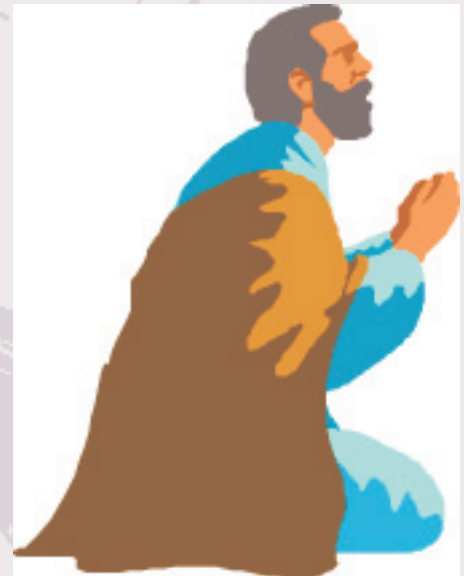
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The Smyth-Helwys Formations use of Eccl. 5:1-5 is under the quarterly title "What We Do Is More Important than What We Say." The premise of this title only superficially fits the viewpoint advocated in the scripture text, as even a quick glance at several commentaries makes clear. Verse six, which lies outside the quarterly text, comes closer to the premise of the title than do the first five verses. The passage doesn't pit words against actions. Instead, it urges extreme caution about how we reach out to God in worship. Our worship must be genuine. This includes not just our words spoken to God but our actions and offerings as well. A more accurate assessment of the passage, which more naturally includes the first seven verses, emphasizes the character of our worship of God. This will be our approach to the scripture text.



How do we approach God? In reverence? With disinterest? Couched in fear? Only wanting a favor? Out of habit? **When do we approach God?** Only at church? In prayer? While at worship? Just when we need something? Only when we feel guilty about some action or word? These and a host of other questions are bundled up in the central topic of this passage. Not the least is the issue of how worship connects to daily living and expressions of obedience. For the Preacher this particularly meant how well we keep our promises to God made in worship.

I Context

The context of Eccl. 5:1-7, although not that easy to determine, does play an important role in correct interpretation of the passage. We will give attention to what is available.

a. Historical

External History. The English name of the book, "Ecclesiastes," reflects the Greek title of the book in the Septuagint, ῥήματα Ἐκκλησιαστοῦ (ἐκκλησιαστικής), which was brought over into Latin in the Vulgate as *verba Ecclesiastes*. This was then transliterated into the English *Ecclesiastes*. The Hebrew title קהלת דברי, (words of *Qohelet*) is

reflected in this translation process from Hebrew to Greek, to Latin and then to English. The Hebrew *Qohelet* literally means "collector" (of sentences) or "preacher." This is the parallel meaning of both the Greek and Latin. The transliteration, rather than translation of the Latin "*Ecclesiastes*" leaves the English title essentially in Latin without an English

expression of meaning.

Who was the collector of these words in this OT document? The book title in Eccl. 1:1 further identifies this person as “The words of the Teacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.” Traditionally, this has been taken as referring to Solomon. This might well be the case, although the parameters of this verse could technically refer to one of David’s other sons. The reputation of Solomon as a wise ruler and the collector of the wisdom materials for ancient Israel have driven this identification as much as anything. If this traditional viewpoint is correct, then the document would have emerged during Solomon’s reign over Israel from approx. 968 to 928 BCE.

Yet several hurdles from within the scripture text itself must be overcome in order to make a convincing case for this traditional view. Most are convinced that these barriers are too high for the traditional viewpoint to successfully make the jump. Leong Seow in the *New Oxford Annotated Bible* (page 944 Heb Bib) calls attention to some of the major barriers:

The date of the book is a matter of dispute, although most scholars argue on linguistic grounds that it should be dated to the postexilic period. The presence of two indisputable Persian loan words (“parks” in 2.5; “sentence” in 8.11) point to a date some time after 459 BCE, for there are no Persian loan words or Persian names in the Hebrew Bible that can be dated earlier. The abundance of Aramaisms (Aramaic loan words, forms, and constructions) also points to the postexilic period, when Aramaic became the *lingua franca* in Palestine. A number of specific idioms regarding inheritance, grants, prisons, social abuses, judicial problems, and socioeconomic classes are attested in documents from the Persian period; in no other periods in history do we find such a coincidence of terminology. These features, together with the fact that there are no Greek loan words (or indisputable Greek ideas), suggest that the book should be dated sometime between 450 and 330 BCE, although many scholars date it a century or two later.

Of course, these factors as a basis for dating the “authorship” of the book do not take into account an ongoing process of editorial revising of the text for updating the concepts in the text; something rather common in the ancient world. Thus the issue

of the origin of this document remains obscured in the ancient Israelite past, with no prospect of ever being completely clarified. It may well be more accurate historically to refer to the material as reflecting the developing Jewish wisdom perspective on life from this very different angle that is found in Ecclesiastes. The roots of this view may very well reach back to Solomon’s era, but the material in its finalized written form that we know reflect the development of that perspective as expressed in the postexilic era. Thus from the tenth century to the fifth century BCE, this distinct viewpoint about life found a place in Israelite wisdom tradition, and that place was secured with the consistent inclusion of this book in the OT canon some four or five centuries later.

This nature and tone of the distinctive viewpoint in Ecclesiastes is summarized in [1:2-11](#), which serves as a Preface to the entire book (NRSV):

2 Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. 3 What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun?

4 A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. 5 The sun rises and the sun goes down, and hurries to the place where it rises. 6 The wind blows to the south, and goes around to the north; round and round goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns. 7 All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they continue to flow. 8 All things are wearisome; more than one can express; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, or the ear filled with hearing.

9 What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun. 10 Is there a thing of which it is said, “See, this is new”? It has already been, in the ages before us. 11 The people of long ago are not remembered, nor will there be any remembrance of people yet to come by those who come after them.

Many are bothered by the very negative tone of these words about life. Careful examination of the text will suggest another way to understand the message of the book. The “Preacher” -- as we will call him from 1:1 -- simply took a hard, honest look at life and the way it often functioned. Injustice, inconsistency and despair are integral elements of living in a sinful world. That is just as true of our world as it

was of ancient Israel. The sinfulness of the world we live in pushes hard toward pessimism and despair. How does one cope? How should one cope? This is where Ecclesiastes

Interesting News

In 1900, 80 percent of the world’s Christians lived in Europe and North America. A century later, 60 percent of the world’s Christians are living in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Christian adherence is waning in the North and it is rising in the South and East.

Joel A. Carpenter, *The Changing Face of Christianity*

makes an important contribution. It never responds with a romanticized, delusional view of life. Life is hard, and it remains hard. To be sure, moments of joy and happiness pop up now and then. But these are fleeting and don't last very long. Life will always have that sense of incompleteness and "unfinishedness" ("all streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full", v. 7).

The main key to coping is reaching out to God. But that reaching out must be genuine and sincere; not phoney or superficial. Here is the place where our text, 5:1-7, makes its contribution to this view of life.

Internal History. The presupposed setting of our



text is worship in the "house of God" (5:1). The expression can refer either to the temple (in Solomon's time) or the synagogue (in the last post-exilic and subsequent time). Thus the setting is a place where God was worshipped by Jewish people. By the beginning of the Christian era this text was understood to refer to both, until the destruction of Herod's temple in 70 AD by the Romans. The Jewish synagogue then became the understood designation of this

reference.

By extension, Christian use of this text applied the reference to places of Christian worship. This has been true from the second century onward.

b. Literary

Literary Genre. The proverbial nature of these verses stands different from those studied in the Book of Proverb. One can quickly notice this in checking the formatting of the English translation. Eccl. 5:1-7 is set in narrative prose form, while the texts we studied in Proverbs is in poetic form. This differing format signals a difference in literary form or genre. That difference is mostly at the literary or grammatical level. That is, how the Preacher expresses his wisdom. Quite clearly he has "applied [his] mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven" (1:13a).

This affirms what becomes clear in a reading of the contents of the book. The Preacher looks at daily life from a human perspective without much emphasis on the religious side. He sees a world filled with evil, although he never attributes this to Satan or a supernatural source. He just observes injustice, wrong doing, destructively immoral conduct etc. In the tension between this evil and the good which he also observes, he sees how the evil so often prevails. Life is robbed of meaning and joy so many times. The central issue for him is how to best cope when living one's life in the midst of all this.

He does not play the religious-opt-out card where

the idealism of religious experience allows one to rise above the pessimism of life in an evil world in the hope of a better life through relationship with God. This is the essential message of Proverbs and other parts of the Jewish wisdom tradition. But religious experience is not discounted or abandoned by the Preacher. It is affirmed as essential and central, as our passage in 5:1-7 asserts. But even in his observations of religious experience his questioning surfaces. Religion, to be useful, must be genuine religion. Phoney expressions of devotion to God are dangerous and destructive. The Preacher has no tolerance for folks who play at religion.

This continual negative tone permeating the entire document is a major factor in the hesitancy of both Jews and Christians to see spiritual value in the book, enough to include it in the canon of sacred scripture.

But the blunt realism of the Preacher in his observations about life ultimately become the basic source of insight and spiritual help from the book. Life is "hebel" he says in 1:2. That is, life is utterly a fleeting vapor, the meaning of "vanity of vanities" in 1:2. As is noted in the *NOAB* (p. 945 Heb Bib), "the Heb word ...literally means 'breath' or 'vapor' (Isa. 57.13;

Ps 62.9). In Ecclesiastes, it is used repeatedly as a metaphor for things that cannot be grasped either physically or intellectually, things that are ephemeral, or absurd.” Consequently, the proverbs in Ecclesiastes tend to be descriptive more than prescriptive. That is, they express observations about how daily life works, much more than offering solutions for coping. To be sure, prescriptive proverbs do surface, as especially in our passage. But they are not the dominating tone of the book.

Literary Setting. Assessing the literary structure of Ecclesiastes has challenged scholars for centuries. J.L. Mays in *Harper’s Bible Commentary* summarizes the challenges:

Qohelet’s reflections begin with a thematic statement (1:2) and a poem (1:4-11); they conclude with a poem and the same thematic statement (11:7-12:7; 12:8). Together with the superscription (1:1), and an elaboration of the thematic statement (1:3), the epilogues (12:9-14) enclose the book in a kind of envelope. The rest of the book includes a few easily recognizable units, for example, the royal experiment in 1:12-2:26 or the praise of companionship in 4:9-12. Nevertheless, the precise structure of the book defies description.

Several interpreters have sought the clue to the book’s structure in refrains that seem to introduce or conclude various segments. However, the sevenfold exhortation to eat, drink, and enjoy life (2:24-26; 3:12-13; 3:22; 5:17-19; 8:15; 9:7-10; 11:7-10) illustrates the difficulty of this approach; the first text concludes a unit and the last one introduces a new unit.

Others have sought to discern the structure of the book in polar opposites and Greek rhetoric, according to which there is a complete balancing of the material in the two halves of the book. But none of these theories is adequate, for some collections of sentences have not been fully integrated into the book. In the book’s unity of tone, theme, and topic, one receives the impression that a single teacher has observed life’s ambiguities and reflected on their meaning, using favorite words: do, work, good, wise, time, know, toil, see, under the sun, fool, profit, portion.

Thus one best sees the thought flow in the book as somewhat random, but governed by reoccurring thoughts, surfacing through catch words etc. No progressive movement of one idea to another leading to a climatic expression exists in the book. Besides, such perspective reflects modern western thinking instead of ancient Jewish ways of stringing ideas together. Any commentary that super imposes such a structure via an outline has misunderstood the ideas in the text and is attempting eisogesis rather than exegesis. That is, preconceived notions are going to be read back into the text, rather than seriously attempting to let the text speak to the reader. The Bible student must let the text speak; not speak to the text. In such, the eisogete assumes himself to be the voice of God, and squelches God’s voice coming through the text.

Ecc. 5:1-7 does follow an especially devastating blow on any superficial declaration of good in human life in 4:1-16. Human achievement doesn’t

Interesting News

Nineteenth-century Baptist missionaries in the American West founded new colleges in such wild places as on the banks of the Brazos in the Republic of Texas, and on the Kalamazoo River up in Michigan Territory. These “uncommon schools,” according to historian Timothy Smith, “were the anvil upon which the relationships between the people’s religious traditions and the emerging political and social structures were hammered into shape.” The new world Christianity is repeating this process. It is relying on higher education to address the summons of Jesus to “teach the nations.”

Joel A. Carpenter, *The Changing Face of Christianity*

accomplish lasting good. Most seeking of good he labels as “chasing after wind” (4:16). The immediate shift to the worship of God in 5:1-7 is typically understood as his answer to the futility of human striving for good. Good can only be found in God. Thus mortals should seek after God, not after good through their own striving. Ecc. 5:8-6:9 returns to his negative reflections on the evil in the surrounding world, and possesses an internal literary structure which is discernible.

II. Message

Literary Structure. The internal literary structure seems to be built around three catch words: 1) guarding one’s steps (vv. 1-2); 2) dreams (vv. 3, 7); and vows (vv. 4-6). We will follow this structure in examining the details.

a Watch your step in worship, vv. 1-2

LXX

4.17 φύλαξον πόδα σου ἐν ᾧ ἔαν πορεύῃ εἰς οἶκον τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ ἐγγύς τοῦ ἀκούειν ὑπὲρ δόμα τῶν ἀφρόνων θυσία σου ὅτι οὐκ εἰσιν εἰδότες τοῦ ποιῆσαι κακόν 5:1 μὴ σπεῦδε ἐπὶ στόματί σου καὶ καρδία σου μὴ ταχυνάτω τοῦ ἐξενέγκαι λόγον πρὸ προσώπου τοῦ θεοῦ ὅτι ὁ θεὸς ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ καὶ σὺ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ἐπὶ τούτῳ ἔστωσαν οἱ λόγοι σου ὀλίγοι

NASB

1 Guard your steps as you go to the house of God and draw near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools; for they do not know they are doing evil. 2 Do not be hasty in word or impulsive in thought to bring up a matter in the presence of God. For God is in heaven and you are on the earth; therefore let your words be few.

NRSV

1 Guard your steps when you go to the house of God; to draw near to listen is better than the sacrifice offered by fools; for they do not know how to keep from doing evil. Never be rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be quick to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven, and you upon earth; therefore let your words be few.

NLT

1 As you enter the house of God, keep your ears open and your mouth shut! Don't be a fool who doesn't realize that mindless offerings to God are evil. 2 And don't make rash promises to God, for he is in heaven, and you are only here on earth. So let your words be few.

Notes:

The Septuagint versification, as well as the Hebrew text, is different from that in the above translations. The English translations reflect dependence on other ancient text sources for verse numbering. This unit of material begins in the LXX with 4:17 and remains one verse behind in numbering. Thus 4:17 in the LXX equals 5:1 in the above English translations are following.

The Preacher begins with an admonition to **guard one's steps** while going into the house of God. Caution is urged for those preparing to worship God. Why? The point here is to urge that worship be approached with sincerity and genuineness. Causal or hypocritical attitudes are dangerous because of who God is and His no-nonsense attitude toward worship.

In the ancient Jewish temple, the very design of the building underscored this posture of reverent worship. God could only be approached in successive stages beginning with the outer court and progressing into the Holy of Holies, which only the High Priest was permitted to enter. Thus, ancient Israel was taught to worship with the utmost reverence by the very design of the temple. For Solomon, this meant that the worshipper should

“guard his steps” while going to the temple to worship. For the sages in Babylonian exile and later, this same principle remained in place. Even though the temple no longer existed, or possibly the second temple of Ezra-Nehemiah was now in place at Jerusalem, the primary center of worship was the synagogue that had emerged during Babylonian captivity. Although many, many variations of architectural design of ancient Jewish synagogues have been uncovered by modern archaeologists, this pattern of reverence in approaching God was essentially retained, largely through the raised platform in the center of the assembly room on which the Law of God was placed.

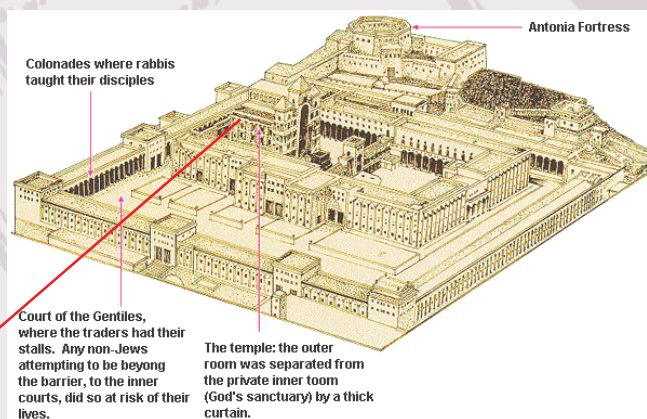
Scattered through the Old Testament are numerous instances where individuals realized that the spot where they were was holy through God's presence.

The immediate reaction was to remove their sandals as an expression of their reverence before a holy God. One of the first instances is that of Abraham in [Exodus 3:5](#): “4 When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, ‘Moses, Moses!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ 5 Then he said, ‘Come no closer! **Remove the sandals from your**

feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.”

How one approached God is the point of our text, as well as the emphasis in both temple and synagogue design.

How that caution should express itself is set forth



by the Preacher in two parts in verses 1b-2, both of which deal with the words one speaks in worship.

First is the axiom: “to draw near to listen is better than the sacrifice offered by fools.” Primarily we worship in order to listen to what God has to say to us. Reverent worship is focused on this posture. The image of “listening” in the original text is focused on obeying God. Often for us, listening is merely being informed. This may or may not lead to some sort of action. But in the Hebrew text, coming near to hear is but another way of saying preparing to obey.

This is contrasted to the offering of sacrifices by fools. These are individuals who assume to know life and God but do not understand either. One of their characteristic traits is incessant talking (Eccl. 10:12-15):

12 Words spoken by the wise bring them favor, but the lips of fools consume them. 13 The words of their mouths begin in foolishness, and their talk ends in wicked madness; 14 yet fools talk on and on. No one knows what is to happen, and who can tell anyone what the future holds? 15 The toil of fools wears them out, for they do not even know the way to town.

Their sacrifices offered up to God grow out of ignorance and thus do not reflect reverent worship. As a consequence, the offerings have no value before God. The basis for this worthlessness is given in the causal statement in 1b (NRSV): “for they do not know how to keep from doing evil.” The precise meaning of the underlying Hebrew text is not clear and is reflected in the varying translations. In contrast to the NRSV, the NASB renders it as “for they do not know they are doing evil.” And the NLT gives “who doesn’t realize that mindless offerings to God are evil.” Roland Murphy (*Word Biblical Commentary*) summarizes:

The translation of v 17b [v. 1b] is uncertain (see the *Notes*), and the line is given various interpretations. Our translation [for they have no knowledge of doing evil.] leaves open the possibility that this is a sarcastic remark, or else that it gives a reason for the ineptitude of fools, who count on ritual excuses (5:5[6]) to cover their irreverence. According to N. Lohfink (*ZDMG*Sup 5 [1983] 113–20), the fool makes sin out to be a harmless violation by offering a sacrifice that is for involuntary wrongdoing (Eccl 5:5[6]). This is tantamount to “being unable to sin,” since they are without guilt.

Whatever the precise meaning, the general meaning is obvious: **their foolishness has nullified the spiritual value of their offerings**. Thus the wise person will avoid approaching God in this manner. The posture of reverent obedience is the only way to come to God.

The **second implication** of caution in worship

is seen in verse two: “Never be rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be quick to utter a word before God...” This stands in contrast to the talkativeness of the fool. Frivolous worship by the fool includes many words, but these are words of ignorance and failure to understand. Listening (v. 1b) now means careful choice of few words (v. 2). What words we do say in worship -- and elsewhere -- had better be sincere and genuine expressions of compliance with God’s will. The mouth (expression) and the heart (deciding) had better be linked up so that what comes out reflects what is down inside. If the right thing is down inside (reverent commitment to obey), then it needs to be expressed with sparing words coming through the mouth.

The basis for all this? Verse 2b provides the rationale: “for God is in heaven, and you upon earth; therefore let your words be few.” The transcendence of God is the point. The fool collapses the distance between God and humanity in his ignorance. The wise recognizes just how much greater God is than humanity. And thus his approach is one of reverence obedience. R. Murphy (*WBC*) provides additional insight:

But the motivation provided by Qoheleth is unique: the difference between God and humans. As Ps 115:3 (and cf. Ps 115:16) says, “Our God is in heaven; whatever he wills, he does.” The emphasis is upon the supremacy of God, not upon his indifference. It is a mistake to characterize Qoheleth’s God as a “distant despot” (A. Lauha); rather, this God cannot be manipulated (5:5[6]). See Matt 6:7.

The connection of all this to us today? The implications are substantial. Christian lopsided emphasis upon God’s love has often led to ignoring or down right ignorance of reverence and a sense of awe before God in worship. How many of us use caution when we enter the worship center for Sunday morning worship? Yes, we watch where we step, especially those of us who are older and more feeble in our walking. But that’s not what the Preacher is talking about. The caution must be in our hearts and minds. We must approach God with reverence and

Interesting News

Christianity grew much more rapidly after the end of the colonial empires than during them. In 1900, there were only about 9 million Christians in all of Africa. A half-century later, this number had tripled, to about 30 million. By 1970, however, this number nearly quadrupled to more than 117 million. Today, the number has more than tripled again, to an estimated 397 million Christians in Africa.

Dana Robert, *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*

Interesting News

More than 60 percent of immigrants to the US come from the global south and east. Demographers predict that in another quarter-century, the United States population will look like that of California, with no ethnic or racial group comprising a majority....The vast majority of these new Americans are Christians. This fact may seem self-evident when considering our Latino neighbors, but the majority of the recent African immigrants also are Christians, and a disproportionately large minority of the Asians are Christians.

Joel A. Carpenter, *The Changing Face of Christianity*

words should be carefully chosen and should express our willingness to do whatever God bids us do. Mostly we are there to listen to God. That must be the top priority. Secondly, we are there to respond to God's voice with words of praise and obedience.

a willingness to obediently hear Him speak to us.

One implication of this is the uttering of few words. Doesn't this mean that we should sit in the worship service and say little or nothing by song, prayer etc.? I think not. What it does imply strongly is that our

dience.

Worship means never losing sight of who God is. The awe inspiring presence of a holy God is central to genuine worship. Our words of worship should reflect this.

b. How about those dreams, vv. 3, 7

LXX

² ὅτι παραγίνεται ἐνύπνιον ἐν πλήθει περισπασμοῦ καὶ φωνῆ ἄφρονος ἐν πλήθει λόγων

⁶ ὅτι ἐν πλήθει ἐνυπνίων καὶ ματαιότητες καὶ λόγοι πολλοί ὅτι σὺν τὸν θεὸν φοβοῦ

NASB

3 For the dream comes through much effort and the voice of a fool through many words.

7 For in many dreams and in many words there is emptiness. Rather, fear God.

NRSV

3 For dreams come with many cares, and a fool's voice with many words.

7 With many dreams come vanities and a multitude of words; but fear God.

NLT

3 Just as being too busy gives you nightmares, being a fool makes you a blabbermouth.

7 Dreaming all the time instead of working is foolishness. And there is ruin in a flood of empty words. Fear God instead.

Notes:

The two catch words linking these verses are "dreams" and "words." In both the Hebrew and the Greek texts the same two words are used. The same Greek word for dream is used in the LXX (v. 2 [3] ἐνύπνιον; v. 6 [7] ἐνυπνίων), as well as for word (λόγος).

What is the point of the two axioms in these verses? Dreams and words are given a negative tone in both proverbs. And they are associated with the fool discussed in the surrounding verses.

In the structure of the text, verse three becomes a justifying reason for the admonition in verse 2c, "let your words be few." But the thought moves forward in a new direction. Thus the listing of it in a separate paragraph in many English translations.

The occasion for dreaming (v. 3) is stated as "much effort" (NASB), "many cares" (NRSV, or "being too busy" (NLT). The last two translations communicate the general concept. Preoccupation with work causes dreams. Bad dreams leads to too much talking.

But a different occasion is presupposed in verse 7. Much dreaming and too much talking can lead to emptiness of life (NASB). Or, much dreaming leads to emptiness of life and that leads to too much talking (NRSV). The distinctive interpretation of the NLT has dreaming instead of working and such leads to foolishness. Too much talking produces ruin.

The idea of [dreaming](#) moves between the idea of "nightmare" (NLT) as the product of excessive working and the day-dreaming of the fool who has grandiose plans that never materialize. The connection of words with dreams may very well come from the tendency to associate dreams as a means of divine communication. The fool after dreaming assumes that he has superior understanding and he proceeds to elaborate on this assumed knowledge with many words. The Preacher had observed that such reflected the ignorance of a fool, not the wisdom of a prophet. This was particularly the case when all this came from not "guarding one's steps" in worship of God. The cure to this comes at the end of

verse seven: “[fear God](#).” This comes full circle to the beginning emphasis in verse one about [guarding one’s steps](#). For the Preacher, fearing God is at the heart of religious experience. One can never approach God legitimately without deep reverence or fear. In the literary structuring of the text, the implication is that such respect of God is to be the defining boundary for what we say and do. This especially is the case when it comes to our worship and promise making to God.

The connection of these two verses to us? Although elsewhere in the Old Testament dreams and visions do play an important role in communicating with God, the Preacher urges a real caution about dreams here. Particularly when they lead to verbosity, more likely dreams are the product of a fool. For

most of my ministry I have had a certain skittishness about the religious dreamers. This came about from a deacon in my first pastorate in the 1960s who “had a dream” that God wanted him to lead a campaign to fire his pastor, me. Fortunately, no one else in the church accepted his dream as coming from God. But the disruption to the fellowship of the church left me nervous when folks start talking about having dreams in which God tells them to do certain things.

The solution to most all our problems that come from dreams and too many words is simply to fear God. When we approach Him with reverence and humility, He will lead us in the right direction. And this will allow us to escape the trap that fools fall into.

c. Making promises to God, vv. 4-6

LXX

³ καθὼς ἂν εὔξη εὐχὴν τῷ θεῷ μὴ χρονίσης τοῦ ἀποδοῦναι αὐτήν ὅτι οὐκ ἔστιν θέλημα ἐν ἄφροσιν σὺν ὅσα ἂν εὔξη ἀπόδος ⁴ ἀγαθὸν τὸ μὴ εὔξασθαί σε ἢ τὸ εὔξασθαί σε καὶ μὴ ἀποδοῦναι ⁵ μὴ δῶς τὸ στόμα σου τοῦ ἔξαμαρτῆσαι τὴν σάρκα σου καὶ μὴ εἴπῃς πρὸ προσώπου τοῦ θεοῦ ὅτι ἄγνοιά ἐστιν ἵνα μὴ ὀργισθῇ ὁ θεὸς ἐπὶ φωνῇ σου καὶ διαφθείρῃ τὰ ποιήματα χειρῶν σου

NASB

4 When you make a vow to God, do not be late in paying it; for *He takes* no delight in fools. Pay what you vow! 5 It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. 6 Do not let your speech cause you to sin and do not say in the presence of the messenger of *God* that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry on account of your voice and destroy the work of your hands?

NRSV

4 When you make a vow to God, do not delay fulfilling it; for he has no pleasure in fools. Fulfill what you vow. 5 It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not fulfill it. 6 Do not let 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 words, and destroy the work of your hands?

NLT

4 So when you make a promise to God, don't delay in following through, for God takes no pleasure in fools. Keep all the promises you make to him. 5 It is better to say nothing than to promise something that you don't follow through on. 6 In such cases, your mouth is making you sin. And don't defend yourself by telling the Temple messenger that the promise you made was a mistake. That would make God angry, and he might wipe out everything you have achieved.

Notes:

These verses focus on the making of vows as a part of ancient Israel worship, especially in the temple in Jerusalem. [Vows](#) to God played a role in Israelite religious life as defined in the *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*:

A solemn promise made to God either to do or to abstain from some action. Heb. *nadar* seems to mean “to separate from profane use; to consecrate to God.” As made to God, a vow is an act of worship; it is a conditional promise to give something to God if God first grants some favor. Vows were most often made in situations of need and have a bargaining quality

[about them](#) (Ps. 132:2 seems to be an exception).

The Preacher urges the worshiper to keep his agreement with the Lord. There is a tone of urgency in keeping promises made to God.

Several motivations underlie this urgency. **First**, God has *no pleasure in fools* (v. 4): “So when you make a promise to God, don't delay in following through, for God takes no pleasure in fools. Keep all the promises you make to him.” To not keep one's promises made to God is to act like [the fool](#) discussed in this larger passage. Such reflects lack of reverence for God, as well as an ignorance of who God is.

Second, don't make a vow if you can't keep it (v. 5-6a): "5 It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not fulfill it. 6 Do not let your mouth lead you into sin." The Old Testament did not require the making of vows. Thus, they were voluntary as stated in [Deut. 23:21-23](#):

21 If you make a vow to the Lord your God, do not postpone fulfilling it; for the Lord your God will surely require it of you, and you would incur guilt. 22 But if you refrain from vowing, you will not incur guilt. 23 Whatever your lips utter you must diligently perform, just as you have freely vowed to the Lord your God with your own mouth.

But once they were made, the serious expectation was that they would be kept, as [Num. 30:2](#) declares:

"When a man makes 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."

Third, don't try to excuse you way out of a vow already made (v. 6b): "do not say before the messenger that it was a mistake; why should God be angry at your words, and destroy the work of your hands?" Most likely, the "messenger" was the priest in the temple to whom the vow to God was verbalized. The "mistake" is an attempted weaseling out of a promise made to God that the fool now finds inconvenient to keep. This principle here builds off the OT code discussion in [Num.15:22-31](#) (cf. [Lev. 4:1-35](#)), which deals with inadvertent failures to follows God's Law:

22 But if you unintentionally fail to observe all these commandments that the Lord has spoken to Moses— 23 everything that the Lord has commanded you by Moses, from the day the Lord gave commandment and thereafter, throughout your generations— 24 then if it was done unintentionally without the knowledge of the congregation, the whole congregation shall offer one young bull for a burnt offering, a pleasing odor to the Lord, together with its grain offering and its drink offering, according to the ordinance, and one male goat for a sin offering. 25 The priest shall make atonement for all the congregation of the Israelites, and they shall be forgiven; it was unintentional, and they have brought their offering, an offering by fire to the Lord, and their sin offering before the Lord, for their error. 26 All the congregation of the Israelites shall be forgiven, as well as the aliens residing among them, because the whole people was involved in the error. 27 An individual who sins unintentionally shall present a female goat a year old for a sin offering. 28 And the priest shall make atonement before the Lord for the one who commits an error, when it is unintentional, to make atonement for the person, who then shall be forgiven. 29 For both the native among

the Israelites and the alien residing among them—you shall have the same law for anyone who acts in error.

30 But whoever acts high-handedly, whether a native or an alien, affronts the Lord, and shall be cut off from among the people. 31 Because of having despised the word of the Lord and broken his commandment, such a person shall be utterly cut off and bear the guilt.

The OT Law made provision for unintentional missteps. Here the person has failed to keep his promise, and now tries to excuse himself in this failure by claiming he made a mistake in making the promise. Once the promise is made, it is set in concrete and cannot be retracted. The tragic story of Jephthah the Gileadite in [Judges 14](#) illustrates this when the vow is made to God irrationally. He made the vow to offer as human sacrifice whoever first passed through the doors of his house, if the Lord would give him victory over the Ammonites. The Lord gave the victory, but his only daughter was the one who first passed through the doors. When she walked through the doors, he cried out (14:35), "Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low; you have become the cause of great trouble to me. For I have opened my mouth to the Lord, and I cannot take back my vow."

The Preacher warns of the judgment of God upon the individual who tries to back out of his promises to God. God in His wrath will destroy **the work of his hands**. In other words, the one who fails to keep his promises to God will suffer the loss of all he sought to accomplish.

What is the connection to us? At minimum, our promises to God are sacred. The New Testament provides no structure for formal vows to God like those found in the OT legal code. But Christians often make [promises to God similar to those made](#) by various individuals in the Old Testament. We should regard those promises as sacred as the Preacher discusses in these verses.

Promises should be made thoughtfully and with hesitancy. We should never make quick promises just to get us out of a sticky situation. But once we make them, we had better keep them! That much is very clear from this passage, as well as the other OT discussions of vows. If we have little chance in keeping our promise, then don't make it to begin with. You're better off not making one, than making one and not keeping it.

Worship of God is a serious matter. The Preacher admonishes us to take it seriously and not lightly.

LXX

^{4.17} φύλαξον πόδα σου ἐν ᾧ ἂν πορεύῃ εἰς οἶκον τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ ἐγγὺς τοῦ ἀκούειν ὑπὲρ δόμα τῶν ἀφρόνων θυσία σου ὅτι οὐκ εἰσιν εἰδότες τοῦ ποιῆσαι κακόν ^{5:1} μὴ σπεῦδε ἐπὶ στόματί σου καὶ καρδία σου μὴ ταχυνάτω τοῦ ἐξενέγκαι λόγον πρὸ προσώπου τοῦ θεοῦ ὅτι ὁ θεὸς ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ καὶ σὺ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ἐπὶ τούτῳ ἔστωσαν οἱ λόγοι σου ὀλίγοι ² ὅτι παραγίνεται ἐνύπνιον ἐν πλήθει περισπασμοῦ καὶ φωνῆ ἀφρονος ἐν πλήθει λόγων ³ καθὼς ἂν εὗξῃ εὐχὴν τῷ θεῷ μὴ χρονίσῃς τοῦ ἀποδοῦναι αὐτήν ὅτι οὐκ ἔστιν θέλημα ἐν ἀφροσιν σὺν ὅσα ἂν εὗξῃ ἀπόδος ⁴ ἀγαθὸν τὸ μὴ εὗξασθαί σε ἢ τὸ εὗξασθαί σε καὶ μὴ ἀποδοῦναι ⁵ μὴ δῶς τὸ στόμα σου τοῦ ἐξαμαρτῆσαι τὴν σάρκα σου καὶ μὴ εἴπῃς πρὸ προσώπου τοῦ θεοῦ ὅτι ἄγνοιά ἐστιν ἵνα μὴ ὀργισθῇ ὁ θεὸς ἐπὶ φωνῆ σου καὶ διαφθείρῃ τὰ ποιήματα χειρῶν σου ⁶ ὅτι ἐν πλήθει ἐνυπνίων καὶ ματαιότητες καὶ λόγοι πολλοὶ ὅτι σὺν τὸν θεὸν φοβοῦ

Note: Verse numbering in LXX -- as well as the Hebrew -- is different from the Vulgate text, which the English translations follow.

NASB

1 Guard your steps as you go to the house of God and draw near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools; for they do not know they are doing evil. 2 Do not be hasty in word or impulsive in thought to bring up a matter in the presence of God. For God is in heaven and you are on the earth; therefore let your words be few. 3 For the dream comes through much effort and the voice of a fool through many words. 4 When you make a vow to God, do not be late in paying it; for *He takes* no delight in fools. Pay what you vow! 5 It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. 6 Do not let your speech cause you to sin and do not say in the presence of the messenger of God that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry on account of your voice and destroy the work of your hands? 7 For in many dreams and in many words there is emptiness. Rather, fear God.

NRSV

1 Guard your steps when you go to the house of God; to draw near to listen is better than the sacrifice offered by fools; for they do not know how to keep from doing evil. 2 Never be rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be quick to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven, and you upon earth; therefore let your words be few. 3 For dreams come with many cares, and a fool's voice with many words. 4 When you make a vow to God, do not delay fulfilling it; for he has no pleasure in fools. Fulfill what you vow. 5 It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not fulfill it. 6 Do not let 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 words, and destroy the work of your hands? 7 With many dreams come vanities and a multitude of words; but fear God.

NLT

1 As you enter the house of God, keep your ears open and your mouth shut! Don't be a fool who doesn't realize that mindless offerings to God are evil. 2 And don't make rash promises to God, for he is in heaven, and you are only here on earth. So let your words be few. 3 Just as being too busy gives you nightmares, being a fool makes you a blabbermouth. 4 So when you make a promise to God, don't delay in following through, for God takes no pleasure in fools. Keep all the promises you make to him. 5 It is better to say nothing than to promise something that you don't follow through on. 6 In such cases, your mouth is making you sin. And don't defend yourself by telling the Temple messenger that the promise you made was a mistake. That would make God angry, and he might wipe out everything you have achieved. 7 Dreaming all the time instead of working is foolishness. And there is ruin in a flood of empty words. Fear God instead.

NIV

1 Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong. 2 Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few. 3 As a dream comes when there are many cares, so the speech of a fool when there are many words. 4 When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow. 5 It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it. 6 Do not let your mouth lead you into sin. And do not protest to the temple messenger, "My vow was a mistake." Why should God be angry at what you say and destroy the work of your hands? 7 Much dreaming and many words are meaningless. Therefore stand in awe of God.

TEV

1 Be careful about going to the Temple. It is better to go there to learn than to offer sacrifices like foolish people who don't know right from wrong. 2 Think before you speak, and don't make any rash promises to God. He is in heaven and you are on earth, so don't say any more than you have to. 3 The more you worry, the more likely you are to have bad dreams, and the more you talk, the more likely you are to say something foolish. 4 So when you make a promise to God, keep it as quickly as possible. He has no use for a fool. Do what you promise to do. 5 Better not to promise at all than to make a promise and not keep it. 6 Don't let your own words lead you into sin, so that you have to tell God's priest that you didn't mean it. Why make God angry with you? Why let him destroy what you have worked for? 7 No matter how much you dream, how much useless work you do, or how much you talk, you must still stand in awe of God.

Message

1 Watch your step when you enter God's house. Enter to learn. That's far better than mindlessly offering a sacrifice, Doing more harm than good. 2 Don't shoot off your mouth, or speak before you think. Don't be too quick to tell God what you think he wants to hear. God's in charge, not you - the less you speak, the better. 3 Over-work makes for restless sleep. Over-talk shows you up as a fool. 4 When you tell God you'll do something, do it - now. God takes no pleasure in foolish gabble. Vow it, then do it. 5 Far better not to vow in the first place than to vow and not pay up. 6 Don't let your mouth make a total sinner of you. When called to account, you won't get by with "Sorry, I didn't mean it." Why risk provoking God to angry retaliation? 7 But against all illusion and fantasy and empty talk There's always this rock foundation: Fear God!

BBE

1 Put your feet down with care when you go to the house of God, for it is better to give ear than to make the burned offerings of the foolish, whose knowledge is only of doing evil. 2 Be not unwise with your mouth, and let not your heart be quick to say anything before God, because God is in heaven and you are on the earth-- so let not the number of your words be great. 3 As a dream comes from much business, so the voice of a foolish man comes with words in great number. 4 When you take an oath before God, put it quickly into effect, because he has no pleasure in the foolish; keep the oath you have taken. 5 It is better not to take an oath than to take an oath and not keep it. 6 Let not your mouth make your flesh do evil. And say not before the angel, It was an error. So that God may not be angry with your words and put an end to the work of your hands. 7 Because much talk comes from dreams and things of no purpose. But let the fear of God be in you.

Hebrew Text:

5:1 אֶל־תִּבְהַל עַל־פִּיךָ וְלִבְךָ אֶל־יְמִינְךָ
לְהוֹצִיא דְבָר לִפְנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים כִּי הָאֱלֹהִים בְּשִׁמּוֹם וְאַתָּה
עַל־הָאָרֶץ עַל־כֵּן יִהְיוּ דְבָרֶיךָ מְעֻטִּים
2 כִּי בֵּא הַחֲלוֹם בְּרַב עֵינַי וְקוֹל כְּסִיל בְּרַב דְּבָרִים
3 כַּאֲשֶׁר תִּדְרֹךְ לְאֱלֹהִים אֶל־תֵּאָחֵר לְשַׁלְּמוֹ כִּי אֵין
חֶפֶץ בְּכִסְיִלִים אֵת אֲשֶׁר־תִּדְרֹךְ שָׁלֵם
4 טוֹב אֲשֶׁר לֹא־תִדְרֹךְ מִשְׁתַּדְּדֹר וְלֹא תִשְׁלֵם
5 אֶל־תִּתֵּן אֶת־פִּיךָ לְחַטִּיא אֶת־בְּשָׁרְךָ וְאַל־תֹּאמַר לִפְנֵי
הַמַּלְאָךְ כִּי שָׁגַגְתָּ הִיא לְמַה יִקְצֹף הָאֱלֹהִים עַל־קוֹלְךָ
וְחָבַל אֶת־מַעֲשֵׂה יָדֶיךָ
6 כִּי בְּרַב חֲלֻמוֹת וְהַבְּלִים וּדְבָרִים הַרְבֵּה כִּי אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים
דָּא
7 אִם־עֵשֶׂק רָשׁ וְגִזְלִים מִשְׁפָּט וְצָרָק תִּרְאֶה בְּמִדְיָנָה
אֶל־תִּתְמָה עַל־הַחֶפֶץ כִּי גַבְיָהּ מַעַל גַּבְיָהּ שִׁמְרֹר וְגַבְיָהּ

Latin Vulgate:

Eccl. 4:17 - 5:6 ⁴⁻¹⁷ custodi pedem tuum ingrediens domum Dei multo enim melior est oboedientia quam stultorum victimae qui nesciunt quid faciant mali ^{5:1} ne temere quid loquaris neque cor tuum sit velox ad proferendum sermonem coram Deo Deus enim in caelo et tu super terram idcirco sint pauci sermones tui ² multas curas sequuntur somnia et in multis sermonibus invenitur stultitia ³ si quid vovisti Deo ne moreris reddere displicet enim ei infidelis et stulta promissio sed quodcumque voveris redde ⁴ multoque melius est non vovere quam post votum promissa non complere ⁵ ne dederis os tuum ut peccare faciat carnem tuam neque dicas coram angelo non est providentia ne forte iratus Deus super sermone tuo dissipet cuncta opera manuum tuarum ⁶ ubi multa sunt somnia plurimae vanitates et sermones innumeri tu vero Deum time

Brenton Translation of LXX

Ecclesiastes 5:1 {04:17} Keep thy foot, whensoever thou goest to the house of God; and when thou art near to hear, let thy sacrifice be better than the gift of fools: for they know not that they are doing evil. ² {05:1} Be not hasty with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be swift to utter anything before God; for God is in heaven above, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few. ³ {05:2} For through the multitude of trial a dream comes; and a fool's voice is with a multitude of words. ⁴ {05:3} Whenever thou shalt vow a vow to God, defer not to pay it; for he has no pleasure in fools: pay thou therefore whatsoever thou shalt have vowed. ⁵ {05:4} It is better that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay. ⁶ {05:5} Suffer not thy mouth to lead thy flesh to sin; and say not in the presence of God, It was an error: lest God be angry at thy voice, and destroy the works of thy hands. ⁷ {05:6} For there is evil in a multitude of dreams and vanities and many words: but fear thou God.