

Guard Your Steps
Ecclesiastes 4:9 – 5:7
October 24, 2021
Rev. Dave Dorst
CenterPoint Church

Turkey dinners for needy families – Lamire Pastries across the street, Sarah will make them for us for a donation.

Read Ecclesiastes 4:9 – 5:7

“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.” (2 Timothy 3:16)

Introduction

You’ve probably sung the song “The Heart of Worship” by Matt Redman before. The first verse says, “When the music fades, all is stripped away, and I simply come longing just to bring something that’s of worth that will bless Your heart.” The chorus says, “I’m coming back to the heart of worship cause it’s all about You; I’m sorry, Lord, for the thing I’ve made it when it’s all about You, Jesus.” Great lyrics to remind us that worship is about God alone; it’s not about the songs or the band’s skill or how it makes us feel, it’s to glorify and worship Jesus. You might not know that there is a backstory to the song, though. Matt Redman was part of a church outside of London in the 1990s called Soul Survivor and they had a great worship atmosphere and band; there was a cool vibe, people were coming because it was exciting and great music. But the pastor, Mike Pilavachi, felt that the line between worshipping God and worshipping the music and the band were a bit blurred. So he decided to do away with the band and the sound system for a time, and just have the church worship God with their voices. It was awkward at first because it was such a change from what they were used to, but eventually the church started singing and praying with heartfelt urgency. They rediscovered why they were worshipping and Who they were worshipping. Eventually they brought the instruments and sound system back, but the church had been reminded what their purpose was, they were refocused. Matt wrote the song reflecting on that.

It’s easy to lose our way, and become unfocused, in our relationship and in our worship of God. It’s easy to say and do things that are careless and fall well short of a heart fully devoted to its Creator. If we’re not often reminded of the heart of worship, the goal and aim of why we go to church and offer up our praise and thanks to Him, we may say and do things that don’t glorify God, and maybe even actually offend Him. I have been in a church service where someone danced to the Spiderman theme song, and one where they played a game with a beach ball and hula hoops. At a church in South Carolina they sang AC/DC’s “Highway to Hell” on Easter and a church in England has installed a giant slide to let people know that church is fun. Maybe the Lord worked through or despite those things, but maybe it’s good to read Ecclesiastes and be told, as we are in today’s passage, to *“guard your steps when you go to the house of God.”*

We’ve got three sections of our text today and they don’t tie together in quite the same way that most of our passages in Ecclesiastes have so far. But we’ll work through them and look for ways to apply them. Before we talk about worship, Solomon talks about friendship and reminds us that

I. We Were Created for Relationships (4:9-12)

⁹ Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. ¹⁰ For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! ¹¹ Again, if

two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? ¹² And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken.

In Genesis 2:18, God said, “*It is not good that the man should be alone.*” Obviously, the initial context was that Adam was the only created being, so God created Eve to be Adam’s helpmate and wife. But this is true of friendship as well, it is not good for humans to be isolated and alone. We all need human interaction, and God certainly does not want believers to be “Lone Ranger” Christians. It’s very tempting to live your life in an isolated way. Our modern world has taken away the need for neighbors to know one another. It’s made it easy to order our own private world in the comfort of our homes – where we retreat and have everything we need to feed ourselves, amuse ourselves, and live out our days without needing anyone else. But that is so contrary to how God has wired us. We need real flesh and blood relationships. And social media, electronic friends don’t count!

Solomon reminds us how vital it is to have friends by using examples that are drawn entirely from travel in the ancient world.¹ Falling into a pit back then could be fatal with no one to pull you out, with no cell phones and no 911 that would send a rescue team. Sleeping outside in the cold and the elements was a very real probability for those travelling at the time, and sleeping back to back with a fellow traveler provided better warmth. And being attacked on the road was a very real possibility, so there was wisdom in travelling in groups. United we stand, divided we fall. Let’s put these verses into different words:

- v. 9 – Friends help us work more effectively; we accomplish more as a team than as individuals.
- v. 10 – Friends help us when we’re hurting, when we’re in need.
- v. 11 – Friends bring needed warmth into our lives.
- v. 12 – Friends defend us when we’re attacked.

When we see all the benefits of friendship, relationships, and living in community, how can we think that walling ourselves off and keeping to ourselves is a healthy thing?

Our Men’s Retreat speaker, Gary Yagel, spoke on the theme of male friendships, or really the lack of them. He cited a survey of 120,000 Christian men who were asked “Do you have a best friend?” An astonishing 95% answered, “No.” So, for every 20 Christian men, 19 of them do not have a best friend. In his book, *Got Your Back*, Gary talks about the fact that in the military you need men to fight alongside, who will have your back, and help you in dangerous situations. In the same way, he says, men need brothers in life who fight alongside of us, have our back and help us in dangerous situations. Life is a fight for a Christian; the world, the flesh, and the devil want to attack us and take us down. But Christian brothers can help us in that fight. Gary’s encouragement is to make those friendships a priority, to get real with one another, and to invest in one another’s lives for our good, for the good of our marriages and families, and for the good of the kingdom and the church.² And what is true for men is just as true for women and children. It’s just that friendship comes more naturally for women and children most of the time; men have all kinds of excuses for not developing close friendships. I’ve heard men say over and over, “I don’t have time for that and I don’t really need that.” But guess, what? You do. Have time and need it.

But even deeper than that, we need to see our Christian brothers and sisters as part of the same body. We are part of the body of Christ universal, so even the Christians you don’t like and the Christians you disagree with on a lot of secondary issues, are your family! The Bible tells us that we need one another, that we complement one another and make up the full body of Christ together,

¹ Ligonier Ministries article “Strength in Numbers” from TableTalk magazine April 2015, p. 47.

² Gary Yagel, *Got Your Back: Helping Christian Men Forge the Brotherhood Connections They Need* (Xulon Press, 2015).

not individually. The hand needs the eye, the eye needs the foot; we all function together to make the body work correctly. That should bring us up short when we're tempted to criticize another Christian, to put them down in judgment and arrogance. "Living in community" has been a catch phrase, a buzz word in churches recently. Let's make it more than a catch phrase, let's live it out.

The next four verses tell us that

II. We Were Created to Embrace Wisdom and Humility (4:13-16)

¹³ Better was a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice. ¹⁴ For he went from prison to the throne, though in his own kingdom he had been born poor. ¹⁵ I saw all the living who move about under the sun, along with that youth who was to stand in the king's place. ¹⁶ There was no end of all the people, all of whom he led. Yet those who come later will not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and a striving after wind.

A foolish king who did not take advice. There is some thick irony in that picture because Solomon's son, Rehoboam, became that king who did not take advice well. 1 Kings chapter 12 tells the story of Rehoboam going before the people of Israel for them to crown him king. They said, "*Your father made our yoke heavy. Now therefore lighten the hard service of your father and his heavy yoke on us, and we will serve you.*" But Rehoboam didn't know if that's how he would govern, so he sent them away for three days and then consulted a group of older men and a group of younger men. The old men told him to lighten up, give the people what they wanted and they would serve him. The young men told him the opposite: to double up and rule them much harsher than his father had. Guess whose counsel he took? The young men. And the people turned on him, crowned another man king over the vast majority of Israel, with Rehoboam in his arrogance becoming king over only one tribe.

Or perhaps Saul and David, Solomon's father, are a better picture: Saul was getting old and foolish, and had heard that David would be inheriting his throne. The crowds chanted, "*Saul has slain his thousands, but David his tens of thousands.*" In jealousy and anger, he attacked David several times and led a group of soldiers to hunt him down. But Saul eventually died in battle and was replaced by David, the youth who had grown up poor.

Or maybe Solomon is that old and foolish king who did not heed God's advice, His law, anymore; who no longer walked in obedience to God as he accumulated foreign wives and foreign gods. Time does not necessarily make people better. We don't automatically become wiser or more noble as we age. We must change and mature as we go through life. It takes both humility and wisdom to stay the course, to grow in our character as we age. When we're replaced by someone younger, smarter, and more talented than us, and no one remembers us in a generation or two, it's clear that it's all vanity and striving after wind!

As we move into chapter 5, our text brings us to church, and reminds us that

III. We Were Created to Worship the True God (5:1-7)

¹ 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. ² 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. ³ For a dream comes with much business, and a fool's voice with many words. ⁴ When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow. ⁵ It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. ⁶ 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? ⁷ For when dreams increase and words grow many, there is vanity; but God is the one you must fear.

How much do you think about and plan the way you prepare to come to worship? Do you think of church as a very weighty responsibility, not to be entered into lightly? Do you plan to get enough sleep over the weekend? Do you read the sermon passage ahead of time, praying that God would give you understanding and insight when that's combined with the preaching? Do you lift up the musicians, the preacher, and everyone involved in serving in prayer? Do you pray for visitors and warmly greet them when they show up? I'm not trying to lay a huge guilt trip on you if you don't do those things, I rarely do all of that myself. But this section starts with the admonition: "*Guard your steps when you go to the house of God.*" He doesn't mean "guard your steps" because you're going to get attacked or trip on the carpet or something like that, but that you need to be careful to enter God's house reverently and appropriately. We need to be thoughtful and consider carefully whether we're worshipping rightly and in a way that honors God.

Go to the house of God to listen and learn. If we are to obey James 1:19 to be "*quick to listen, slow to speak*" when it comes to other people, how much more so when we approach the Creator of the Universe. I'm sure you've been in a conversation with someone and a few minutes in you think, "This person is not listening to a word I'm saying." They've already decided you're not really worth their time and they're just being polite. We can do that to God; if you approach God with words rather than with a listening ear, you don't really understand and value who He is. We need God to speak to us through His word and His Spirit to instruct and shape us.

And Solomon emphasizes that our words get us into trouble, both because we fill up the air when we should actually be listening and waiting for God to instruct us, and also because we speak quickly and sin. Or we vow something that we have no intention of fulfilling. I was trying to think of a good personal story of a vow or oath that was broken, but I couldn't think of anything. But, we went over to lunch yesterday at a local pastor's house (Mike) and I got my story. He was telling us that his family went to see Dune in the theater Friday night but he stayed home and watched it on HBO Max because when he was 16 yrs. old he vowed never to see a movie in the theater, more for financial than moral reasons. But 20 yrs after he made that vow, his daughter really, really wanted to go see the Lion King in theaters, so he broke down and decided to take her. They got in and he was feeling a little guilty that he was breaking his vow when the movie started. But then suddenly the screen went dark and the projector completely stopped working. They asked the theater owners if that happened often, they said it was the first time it had ever broken. So, there you go: God will break things if He needs to to keep you from breaking your vows.

Verses 4-5 imply that people break their vows before God because they don't think that God will hold them to them. We may be talking about very specific vows made in the heat of the moment, maybe something like giving up things for Lent; but I think of the more serious vows we make: Vows of lifelong commitment to our spouses. Vows to be a faithful, committed church member. Vows to raise our children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. If you are witness in a court of law, you vow to "tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth," and if you break that, you are guilty of perjury and could be fined or sentenced to jailtime. But we seem to think that vows before the Lord are optional, that He doesn't really care if we break them. Think again. I'd rather commit perjury and go to jail than break one of my vows to God. Solomon says it's better not to vow at all than to break one you made hastily. Deuteronomy 23:21-23: "*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. But if you refrain from vowing, you will not be guilty of sin. You shall be careful to do what has passed your lips, for you have voluntarily vowed to the Lord your God what you have promised with your mouth.*" A wise person is slow to commit herself, but when she does, she follows through. A true worshipper of God makes their yes mean yes and their no mean no (Matt. 5:34-37).

This reminds me of a scene in that old Tom Cruise movie, *Jerry Maguire* (not recommended viewing). Jerry is a sports agent looking to represent a top football draft prospect coming out of college. He meets with the kid and his family and everything goes great. Jerry gets a private moment with his dad, who assures him, “We decided to stay with you... I told myself, if he shows up, you stick with him... you know I don’t do contracts, but what you do have is my word and it’s stronger than oak.” Later in the movie, Jerry goes back to the family and is talking about their draft day strategy when he finds out that, in fact, they have signed with another agent. “You didn’t sign anything... right? Tell me you didn’t sign because I’m still sort of moved by your ‘my word is stronger than oak’ thing.” It’s the lowest point of the movie for Jerry because he has been betrayed by someone who went back on their word. We should be people who treat “our words as stronger than oak” and don’t go back on vows, oaths, promises or commitments when it’s convenient or easier to break them. Let the world see that Christians are people of their word.

If you don’t think that God is serious about us keeping our vows and following through on what we have pledged, you need to go read Acts chapter 5. A couple in the early church (Ananias and Sapphira) sold some property and said they would give all the money they got for it to the church. They held some back, and when they each went separately to the church, God took their lives. I’m not saying that will happen to you if you don’t follow through on a pledge, but it shows you God’s attitude towards those who make vows that they have no intention of keeping.

Verse 7 – “*God is the one you must fear.*” We fear a lot of things – losing our comfort, our safety, our status, our lives, the lives of those we love. But the one who should fear is God. “*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom*” – Proverb 9:10. “But I thought we’re supposed to think of God as our loving Father?” Yes, we are. But appropriate, healthy fear of God reminds us that He is the all-powerful One who can destroy anything in the universe with a thought or a word. We start with a healthy reverence of Who God is so that we live our lives before Him in a way that honors Him.

Conclusion

At first I didn’t know how to tie all of these points together. They seemed like all different ideas, and in some ways they are. But there’s a sense where worshipping God rightly leads to all three areas that we talked about: as we worship and serve God we build Christian friendships and community, we develop a life of integrity and humility, and we follow through on the things that we’ve promised to God. Is your life characterized by seeking community, by living in wisdom and humility, and by following through with your obedience to God? None of us is going to do those things perfectly, but we develop in those areas and we deepen them when we are regularly going to church, worshipping God in Spirit and truth with other believers, and when we devote ourselves to studying the Scriptures and praying on our own.

You probably heard a month or so ago that the actor and comedian, Norm MacDonald, of Saturday Night Live fame, died after a battle with cancer. A man who interviewed him shared a lengthy quote from the interview:

“Some people believe that man is divine, like kind of a hippie idea. I can’t believe that because I know my own heart, and I know that’s not true. Others believe that we’re wretched like the cynics or the atheists would believe we’re all just wretched nothingness, just animals, just creatures. I can’t believe that. It doesn’t make any sense, that we’re just beasts. I will say that Christianity has this interesting compromise where we’re both divine and wretched, and

there's this Middle Man that's the Savior, that through Him we can become divine, but we're born wretched. I kind of like that one, because it sort of makes sense."³

No one would confuse Norm MacDonald for a theologian, but that's pretty insightful. Human beings are at the same time the highest of God's creation and utterly wracked with depravity and sin. And it takes the Middle Man, as he called Him, to come and pave the way for us to be redeemed and get to heaven. Jesus is the Savior who came to earth because God had been promising a Messiah to Israel through the years, through the ages. He had promised a descendant of David, one who would be greater than Moses, who would come and lead Israel out of her darkness. And because God never vows something that He will not follow through on, because God is the source of all goodness and truth, Jesus came to fulfill everything that God had ever promised, every prophecy ever made to His people. He was born in a divine union of the Holy Spirit placing Him inside of his human mother, Mary. He lived a sinless life for over 30 years, teaching God's ways to His followers, and eventually was arrested and condemned to die a criminal's death on a cross. Because He died in our place, those who believe in Jesus are forgiven and granted a place in heaven for eternity with God. God takes no pleasure in fools, our passage said, so don't be a fool. Don't pass up the free gift of salvation that is offered to you through the death of Jesus. Your life is vanity without Him, come and see that the Lord is the fountain of life. Amen.

Benediction

Isaiah 55:6-7 - *"Seek the Lord while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, that He may have compassion on him, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon."*

³ Eric Sorensen's article "The Gospel According to Norm," found at 1517.org.