

Why Listen?

The wise person heeds the warnings gained from past mistakes and godly counselors.

As a pastor for thirty years, I officiated many marriage ceremonies. Prior to each ceremony, I asked the future husband and wife to participate with me in premarital counseling. My goal was to help the couple establish the best possible spiritual foundation for their life together.

Part of the counseling consisted of some straightforward advice, including recommending the couple establish five basic habits. First, I suggested they establish a habit of giving thanks to God at the start of every family meal. Second, I recommended they establish the daily practice of devotional Bible reading as a couple. Similarly, the third daily practice was to pray together. These two practices in particular would help the couple mature spiritually and develop a single value system. Moreover, committing to having a daily conversation together with God would help them resolve conflicts and find solutions to problems that typically arise in most marriages.

Fourth, I strongly recommended that the couple find a Bible-centered, Christ-honoring church and become active members. Fifth and finally, I advised the couple to develop close friendships with several mature believers (or couples) in that church. Did every couple that I counseled and officiated their wedding follow through on these commitments? No.

For example, a young couple who had grown up in the church asked me to conduct their wedding. They had known each other since childhood and professed to be believers. In our counseling sessions, they readily agreed to establish the five habits in their marriage. Indeed, the first few months of their marriage seemed idyllic. Soon, however, I noticed that their participation in church services and activities grew sporadic and limited. Not long after that, they came to me again for counseling. I asked if they had worked to establish the five habits. They admitted they had not. Sadly, this couple eventually ended their marriage through divorce.

In another case, a couple who lived in a distant community requested that I officiate their wedding ceremony at a nearby tourist attraction. I reluctantly agreed when they promised to participate in premarital counseling sessions. After the wedding, I didn't hear from the couple again for twenty-five years.

Then out of the blue the couple called me one day to say they were celebrating their twenty-fifth anniversary and wanted to thank me for telling them about the five habits. They had worked hard to practice them faithfully and had built a wonderful family life together. This Bible study session focuses on the importance of not only receiving godly counsel from others but also heeding such counsel.

UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

ECCLESIASTES 4:7-5:7

Ecclesiastes 4:7-16 continues Solomon's discourse on the loneliness of wealth that he introduced in 4:4-6. Verses 7-8 tell of a man who has no family or friends. The man is a workaholic who strains to increase his wealth. Nonetheless, the lack of a family haunts his thinking. He concludes that facing life's struggles alone is "a miserable task" (4:8).

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 addresses the value of friendship. Two people working together can accomplish more than one individual working alone. Moreover, they can assist and protect each other in times of danger. On a cold night they can pool their resources and stay warm. They can better fend off a single attacker who might seek to harm one or both of them. Solomon underscored the value of friendship by citing a popular proverb.

Ecclesiastes 4:13-16 focuses on the frailty of political power. Solomon compared the reigns of two kings. Both were born into poverty. When the first became old and ignored his counselors' sage advice, the second usurped the throne.

Ecclesiastes 5:1-7 deals with reverence and honesty in religious matters. Verses 1-3 address worship at the temple in Jerusalem. Solomon warned worshipers to be careful, humble, and sincere in their prayers and their actions in worship. Bowing before God could easily become a rote and hypocritical performance before other worshipers. Such folly was unacceptable to God.

Verses 4-7 deal with making vows to God. Sacred vows were an integral feature of religion in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Hannah, Samuel's mother, made a vow before the child's birth (see 1 Sam. 1:10-11). The apostle Paul shaved his head as part of a religious vow that he had taken (see Acts 18:18). The overarching conclusion to be drawn from Ecclesiastes 5:4-7 is that people need to depend on God's grace instead of their own works, no matter how pious their actions. Humility in worship, thoughtful prayer, and honest speech are characteristics of a godly lifestyle.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

WHEN LEADING (Eccl. 4:13-16)

Solomon reminded God’s people of the value of continually listening to wise counsel. He pointed to the cycle often seen in leadership: a person ascends to become king, then gradually loses touch with the people and eventually is discarded for a new leader—who then may repeat the cycle.

VERSE 13

Better is a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king who no longer pays attention to warnings.

Whether Ecclesiastes 4:13-16 is autobiographical by Solomon or a general observation is unclear. There is some evidence following Solomon’s death that, in the minds of some at least, the king had ignored the overburdened plight of many of his subjects (see 1 Kings 12:10-11). However, other features in the Ecclesiastes 4:13-16 example do not fit Solomon’s case. Solomon was neither poor nor a prisoner when he became king. Nevertheless, the power of general, proverbial examples rests in their broad applicability. In other words, people can see themselves and their situations in at least some of the example’s features and thus take important life lessons from the example.

Ecclesiastes 4:13 reads like one of the typical forms of Israelite proverbs, a form that Solomon would have known well (see Prov. 12:9; 15:16-17; 16:8,19; 17:1; 19:1; 27:5; 28:6). In this type of proverb, two contrasting possible realities are considered, and a judgment is given that having more of one of the realities and less of the other is to be preferred.

In Ecclesiastes 4:13, Solomon declared that it is **better** to be a **poor but wise youth** (“child,” KJV) than to be **an old but foolish king**. Take note that while age and station in life are noticeable differences in the two individuals, it is the contrasting feature of wise versus foolish that tilts the scale of judgment between better and worse. A poor young person who is *wise* can (and likely will) become mature and grow more prosperous in the future. On the other hand, the *foolish* old king is likely headed for more chaos, danger, pride, and overconfidence. The king is foolish because he no longer listens to his advisors’ warnings about looming threats.

At the beginning of his reign, the youthful Solomon earned an international reputation for his wisdom (see 1 Kings 4:29-34). The content of Ecclesiastes suggests that the book dates from late in his reign. In many ways, then, King Solomon had indeed grown old and foolish. He procured an enormous harem and assimilated the trappings of pagan monarchies.

He abandoned the exclusive worship of the Lord God and promoted his many wives' idolatrous worship of false gods (see 1 Kings 11:1-10).

VERSE 14

For he came from prison to be king, even though he was born poor in his kingdom.

In this verse, Solomon began focusing on the past of the “old but foolish king” of the previous verse. Similar to the “wise youth,” the old king had been born into poverty (**born poor in his kingdom**). Moreover, he had overcome imprisonment with its attendant absence of freedom and political power to occupy the most sovereign and powerful position in the land (**came from prison to be king**). That the old king had formerly been a prisoner may suggest that in his younger years he was part of an opposition group to the ruler before him. Now he was faced with the possibility that some other “wise youth” might soon do to him what he had done to his predecessor.

As realistic as these details seem, they do not correspond to any known incident in Solomon's life. In a broad sense, however, the example coincides closely with the often typical experiences of ancient rulers. Moreover, it has great relevance to modern governments and those who would aspire to lead them. Political power and prestige are by nature fleeting.

VERSE 15

I saw all the living, who move about under the sun, follow a second youth who succeeds him.

Solomon then described the transfer of leadership from the standpoint of the people being governed. The phrase **all the living, who move about under the sun** refers to the people who once supported the reigning king. These people had presumably welcomed the change of rulers when the king was an energetic young man who overcame imprisonment to take the throne. Now, however, the king had grown old and had fallen into the same error as his predecessor. He had lost touch with his subjects and refused to follow the wise counsel of his advisors. Therefore, the people were no longer loyal to the old king. Instead, they began to **follow a second youth**—the “wise youth” of verse 13!

VERSE 16

There is no limit to all the people who were before them, yet those who come later will not rejoice in him. This too is futile and a pursuit of the wind.

The words **there is no limit** (“no end,” KJV; ESV; NIV) **to all the people** refer to a multitude too large to count. However, the phrase **who were before them** (literally, “who were to their faces”) is ambiguous in the Hebrew text. Some Bible scholars interpret the first line of verse 16 to mean that the new king governed an immense, nearly uncountable, population. Other scholars propose that the first half of the verse refers to the many generations of people who lived prior to the old king’s time—and thus supported previous kings.

The second interpretation seems to provide a more likely contrast with the second part of the verse: **those who come later will not rejoice in** the old, foolish king. Whether by death or being deposed by an up-and-coming “wise youth,” the old king obviously will not retain the support of future generations of people. The old king will be gone, and the people will put their support behind a successor. The cycle of political power will (and must) keep moving. And like so many other aspects of human life, Solomon noted that this constant rise and fall of political leaders seemed **futile and a pursuit of the wind**.

The phrase *pursuit of the wind* offers a vivid word-picture of futility. It describes the ludicrous effort of a human being running after the wind in the hopes of either capturing it or discovering where it goes. Anyone who tries to pursue the wind will fail miserably. It is a foolish waste of time and effort.

It should be said that Ecclesiastes 4:13-16 does not negate the value of government or deem political leaders as unnecessary. Rather, it combats the foolishness of prideful arrogance in leaders. It is tragic when long-time leaders (of any type) fall prey to the temptation of self-importance, trusting only in their own wisdom, losing touch with the people they lead, and ignoring the counsel of advisors. To be most effective, Christian leaders should willingly and continually avail themselves of wise counsel when leading.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Aging” on pages 33–34 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How would you summarize the biblical perspective of aging? What potential advantages does a mature age give for leadership? What are potential disadvantages?

WHEN WORSHIPING (Eccl. 5:1-3)

Solomon challenged worshipers to approach God with a heart of obedience rather than with meaningless rituals. He further encouraged worshipers to listen more than they spoke when in the presence of God.

VERSE 1

Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Better to approach in obedience than to offer the sacrifice as fools do, for they ignorantly do wrong.

The basic meaning set forth by the verb **guard** (“keep” KJV) is “to employ great care over” something. Here the term applies to personal discipline in one’s life. Literally, the phrase rendered **your steps** is “your foot.” Solomon was thus envisioning worshipers walking to the temple in Jerusalem (**the house of God**). Figuratively, the imagery of walking could also refer to one’s actions—that is, to one’s lifestyle (see Deut. 5:33; Gal. 5:16). In that regard, Solomon’s instruction called for careful, faithful living as the people of God. Just as misplaced or errant steps could prevent someone from reaching the place of worship, even so sinful living could make a hypocritical mockery of seeking to experience God’s holy presence in worship.

The idea behind Solomon’s command implies that worshipers decide how they will approach God in worship. Often this decision concerns the attitude behind worship as much as the actions themselves. The injunction calls for worshipers to come into God’s presence with sincere reverence, because wherever God manifests His presence is holy ground (see Ex. 3:4-6).

When coming into the manifest presence of God in worship, it is **better to approach in obedience than to offer the sacrifice as fools do**. This instruction is similar in meaning to the prophetic word delivered by Samuel to a disobedient, presumptive King Saul: “Look: to obey is better than sacrifice, to pay attention is better than the fat of rams. For rebellion is like the sin of divination, and defiance is like wickedness and idolatry” (1 Sam. 15:22b-23a; compare Ps. 51:16-17; Jer. 7:22-23; Hos. 6:6; Matt. 9:13). Although the translation *better to approach ... than to offer* has some of the markings of the “better than” proverb form (see Eccl. 4:13), other Bible translations give the two infinitives the force of an additional command building on *guard your steps*. In other words, the best way to guard one’s steps in approaching God in worship is to faithfully and consistently obey Him in daily living.

The Hebrew word rendered *obedience* literally means “to hear with an intent to obey what is heard.” It is the same word that appears at the beginning of Deuteronomy 6:4-5 (the Shema), a passage that Jesus later declared was the most important commandment in the law (see Mark 12:28-29). The term has the sense of effective listening. A wise believer will be alert and sensitive regarding the songs, prayers, and sermons in a worship service. God’s people should worship with anticipation that God will speak to them through His Word and those who proclaim it. God’s people then must listen carefully to the message from God. Finally, they must obey what God says.

The biblical concept of foolishness goes beyond silliness; it usually refers to more serious, self-destructive (even sinful) behavior. Thus, Solomon described people who offer foolish sacrificial worship as those who **ignorantly do wrong** (“consider not that they do evil,” KJV). The Hebrew word translated *wrong* is an adjective denoting moral deficiencies that cause injury to oneself or others. Here the term applies to behavior in worship that does not meet God’s standard. Such behavior harms both the person who acts in such a fashion as well as those who worship together with him or her. This is why a believer cannot legitimately claim, “My actions do not impact anyone but me.” Each believer’s foolish actions chip away bits and pieces of the spiritual foundation of the entire congregation.

VERSE 2

Do not be hasty to speak, and do not be impulsive to make a speech before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few.

Ecclesiastes 5:1 focuses on people’s approaching God to worship Him—whether in coming to “the house of God” or in carrying out worship rituals there such as offering “the sacrifice.” In verse two, Solomon appeared to be focusing on approaching God through the gift of prayer and the making of vows. Both verses emphasize one overarching reality: the Lord alone is God, and we human beings are not; we are His creatures (see Ps. 100:3). God is fundamentally and sovereignly above His creation, including human beings who are made in His image. Solomon expressed this fundamental reality in Ecclesiastes 5:2 when he declared, **God is in heaven and you are on earth.** This reality should inform and govern all of our efforts to **make a speech before God.**

Solomon’s first guideline for prayer and vow-making is to **not be hasty to speak.** The Hebrew verb rendered *be hasty* (“be ... rash,” KJV; ESV; “be quick” NIV) often carries the meaning “to be troubled or afraid.” Fear can lead people to say troubling things or make foolish promises. Consider, for example, the so-called “foxhole prayers” that soldiers make when they are in danger on the battlefield. However, soldiers aren’t the only ones who make rash vows to God in fearful situations. It is truly a temptation “common to humanity” (1 Cor. 10:13).

The phrase **do not be impulsive** is parallel in meaning yet provides additional insight to the overall command. The verb rendered *be impulsive* (“be hasty,” KJV; ESV; NIV) emphasizes speaking quickly without due consideration of the collateral damage that might be caused by what is said. Proverbs 15:28 admonishes, “The mind of the righteous person thinks

before answering, but the mouth of the wicked blurts out evil things.” The New Testament adds these two pearls of wisdom: “I tell you that on the day of judgment people will have to account for every careless word they speak” (Matt. 12:36). “Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you should answer each person” (Col. 4:6). If wisdom dictates thoughtfulness and grace in our conversations with other people, how much more should it inform and govern our prayers to God?

Ecclesiastes 5:2 closes with the counsel to **let your words be few**. Proverbs 10:19 offers a similar word of wisdom: “When there are many words, sin is unavoidable, but the one who controls his lips is prudent.” Meaningless human chatter does not move God to respond (see Matt. 6:7). Jesus warned against praying in a manner to impress other people rather than to communicate with God (see Matt. 6:5; Luke 20:47). On the other hand, neither Solomon’s warning nor other biblical passages on prayer should be understood to prohibit congregational prayer or expressing one’s deepest feelings in private prayer (see Luke 18:13-14).

VERSE 3

Just as dreams accompany much labor, so also a fool’s voice comes with many words.

In this verse, Solomon quoted a popular proverb of the time. Although the application of the second half of the proverb with regard to the discussion of guarding one’s speech is clear, the meaning of the first half of the proverb remains uncertain. At the heart of the uncertainty is the sense of the Hebrew word translated **dreams**. Does the proverb refer literally to *dreams* that come with sleep or to daydreams about great accomplishments? Indeed, the term may be a figurative reference to having big goals in life. All three viewpoints have merit; however, the association of dreams with the phrase **much labor** (“multitude of business,” KJV; “much business,” ESV; “many cares,” NIV) may favor the second or third views over the first view. In any case, the point made by the proverb is that just as big dreams are often the prelude to much hard work, even so the sounds of **a fool’s voice** are often the prelude to an incessant droning of **many words**.

Jesus warned His disciples about babbling on in prayer “like the Gentiles, since they imagine they’ll be heard for their many words” (Matt. 6:7). A multiplicity of words—whether in one’s prayers or sacred vows—cannot substitute for honesty and faithful living. Ultimately, fools’ verbose proclamations will expose their true character and the dishonesty of their speech (see Prov. 26:23-28). Believers are to worship God in reverent obedience, listening for and heeding His Word above all.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Memorize Ecclesiastes 5:1. What are some practical ways that believers can guard their steps as they approach God's house for worship? Why is a life of obedience important for the believer not only at God's house but also in places and times other than at church?

WHEN PROMISING (Eccl. 5:4-7)

VERSE 4

When you make a vow to God, don't delay fulfilling it, because he does not delight in fools. Fulfill what you vow.

Most vows in the Old Testament were voluntary and conditional. Either an individual or a group of people could enter into a vow. For example, when Jacob fled from his brother Esau's promised revenge, he vowed that if the Lord provided for and protected him, eventually bringing him safely back to the promised land, then he would worship only the Lord as God (see Gen. 28:20-21). The people of Israel made a vow when the Canaanite king of Arad attacked them during their journeys in the wilderness. The people promised God that if He gave them victory in a crucial battle, they would completely destroy this pagan king's army and his cities (see Num. 21:2-3).

Solomon recognized in Ecclesiastes 5:5 the temptation to **make a vow to God** but then for various reasons **delay fulfilling it**. Solomon warned that such procrastination was foolish. And God **does not delight in** ("has no pleasure in," ESV; NIV) **fools**. The Hebrew word rendered *fools* does not suggest mental deficiency but rather a practice of making bad decisions with destructive outcomes.

Truth is so elemental to God's character that Jesus said, "I am the truth" (John 14:6). Likewise, Jesus taught that truth should therefore be foundational to His followers' character. Their integrity should be so trustworthy that their word needed no oath (see Matt. 5:37; Jas. 5:12). Failure to keep one's promise to an all-knowing God is utterly absurd.

VERSE 5

Better that you do not vow than that you vow and not fulfill it.

The previous verse concluded with a command to fulfill one's vows. Since vows were typically voluntary commitments, people needed to enter into

them seriously, but never frivolously. In this regard, then, Solomon warned that it is **better that you do not vow than that you vow and not fulfill it.**

The Hebrew verb rendered *fulfill* comes from the same root word as the noun translated “peace” (Hebrew, *shalom*). Interestingly, it is the same root word from which the name “Solomon” was formed. The word’s foundational meaning is “to be in a covenant of peace.” The biblical concept of peace refers to completeness—a wholeness that comes from being in right relationship with God. Failing to fulfill a vow to God equates to lying and thus to breaking the covenant of peace. God cannot and does not ignore such dishonesty.

VERSE 6

Do not let your mouth bring guilt on you, and do not say in the presence of the messenger that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry with your words and destroy the work of your hands?

Refusing to fulfill a vow brought **guilt** on the one who foolishly made the vow. Further, it was unacceptable in God’s eyes to claim **that it was a mistake.** The **messenger** mentioned here is unclear but may have referred to a temple official who was responsible to collect the proceeds of the vow at its completion. Solomon posed a rhetorical question at the end of verse 6 to emphasize that lying to the Lord (by failing to keep a vow) would have serious consequences (see Acts 5:1-5).

VERSE 7

For many dreams bring futility; so do many words. Therefore, fear God.

Dreams never turned into action only **bring futility.** Similarly, **many words** are nothing more than empty air if they are not the catalyst for obedient living. Therefore, Solomon’s conclusive word in regard to prayers and vows is to **fear God.** Fearing God in the Scriptures refers to living one’s life with a deep awareness of and reverence for who He is. Once again, Solomon’s faith rose to the surface of his thinking. So should it be for us as well!

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Worship” on pages 1670–1672 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What are some vows that people might fulfill as they worship in God’s house? Why is it better not to make a vow than to make one you don’t intend to keep?