



Why Listen?

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

ECCLESIASTES 4:13–5:7

One of the difficulties of parenting is trying to warn children not to make poor decisions. Parents are able to give these warnings because they learned the hard way through the many mistakes they made along the way—many mistakes that could have been avoided if they had listened to their own parents. Much pain and many heartaches can be avoided when one has a teachable spirit. In Ecclesiastes 4:13–5:7, the Teacher instructs the reader that it is wise to heed the warnings of past mistakes and the wise advice of godly counselors.

**What lessons from history do people rely on when living today?
Why might a person ignore history and the lessons to be learned?**

UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

ECCLESIASTES 4:13–5:7

The Teacher wrote this book as a record of his search for meaning in life. He began with a record of his own personal failed attempts to discover the meaning of life. His conclusions were the verdicts of one who had personally investigated every angle before declaring his judgments on the matter. He pursued several paths, nevertheless each of them were dead ends.

In his search for meaning in life, Solomon discovered life only makes sense when one acknowledges God. Otherwise, it is all nonsense. For example, while it is impossible for fallen humans living in a fallen world to understand the various seasons of life and all the activities that accompany these seasons, people should recognize that God in His sovereignty has appointed all of them and that they are appropriate to His purpose. What is God's purpose? It is to teach people that He should be at the center of their lives. The ability to be active and enjoy the fruits of one's endeavors is a gift from God. Therefore, one should enjoy God's blessings and do good (3:1-15).

Additionally, human beings need to live life with an appropriate understanding of the present fallen world in which they live. Living in a fallen world means living in a world where sin thrives. In its present state, it is chaotic and will never satisfy one's deepest longings. Living in a fallen world means living in a dying world. Therefore, people should live with a proper perspective of their own mortality (3:16–4:6). Finally, Solomon surmised what God said in the beginning: "It is not good for the man to be alone" (Gen. 2:18). A life lived in fellowship with others is better than a life lived in isolation (4:7-12).

As you read Ecclesiastes 4:13–5:7, identify words and phrases that emphasize listening. What are the dangers of failing to listen?

EXPLORE **THE TEXT**

WHEN LEADING (ECCL. 4:13-16)

¹³ Better is a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king who no longer pays attention to warnings. ¹⁴ For he came from prison to be king, even though he was born poor in his kingdom. ¹⁵ I saw all the living, who move about under the sun, follow a second youth who succeeds him. 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.

VERSE 13

The Teacher recognized that having a teachable spirit was necessary for living a meaningful and successful life, and this means receiving instruction in community with those who are experienced and wise. Valuing and receiving instruction from wise counselors is central to the Bible's concept of wise living. (See Prov. 4:13; 19:20.) In contrast, fools arrogantly despise instruction and wisdom. (See Prov. 1:7; 5:12-13; 15:5.)

In ancient Israel, the general consensus was that young people were foolish and old people wise. What's more, kings were supposed to be guided by wisdom (Prov. 8:15). Here, Solomon used irony to teach the wisdom of being teachable by stating that ***a poor but wise youth*** is better than an experienced ***king*** who has sat on the throne many years but is no longer willing to listen to wise counsel. In contrast to the much older king, this young male, possibly a teenager, was teachable and willing to pay attention to the insightful advice of others. The older king's refusal to listen to wise counsel was ***foolish*** and shameful.

VERSES 14-16

The young man was the most unlikely person to become a king or be recognized as wise, ***for he came from prison***. As a prisoner, he would have been deprived of the ability to make any decisions for himself. He would have been at the mercy of others and either disdained or forgotten by society. Slaves in the ancient Near East lived in better conditions than did prisoners. Also, describing him as ***born poor*** means he came

from humble beginnings. Nevertheless, Solomon's bottom line was that wisdom does not depend on one's birth, social class, wealth, or age. This teaching is both a warning and an encouragement at the same time. The best of conditions for learning wisdom do not guarantee it, and the worst of conditions cannot in and of themselves keep one from attaining it and the opportunities it affords, such as becoming king in the case of this young man. Solomon's story is reminiscent of Joseph, who was released from prison in order to rule over Egypt as Pharaoh's second in command.

What are the characteristics of teachable people, and how does one develop a teachable spirit?

The Teacher witnessed a **second youth** who succeeded the first young man who had replaced the old foolish king. The people who once adored the first young man who became king now followed his successor. As wise as the young man who replaced the old but foolish king was, his reign came to an end just as the foolish king's reign did before him. So regardless of whether one is foolish or wise, one's time on this earth is short-lived.

The third king's popularity appears to have surpassed that of his two predecessors. Regardless, his idolization and influence were also fleeting. No matter how great a king he was and how much the people loved him, those of the next generation would fail to appreciate all that he had accomplished and would soon forget him. This too is similar to what happened to Joseph, even though he saved the lives of multitudes of peoples. After he died, the next king who came to power "did not know about Joseph" and initiated a program of heavy oppression on Joseph's people (Ex. 1:8). The Teacher knew that the whims of the masses change directions as quickly as **the wind**, and the human aspiration for eternal glory is as **futile** as a **pursuit of the wind**. Jesus' question was indicative of the Teacher's observation when He asked, "For what does it benefit someone to gain the whole world and yet lose his life?" (Mark 8:36).

How is the cycle described by Solomon in this passage seen today?

BIBLE SKILL: *Use a Bible dictionary to gain insight.*

Read articles about vows in a Bible dictionary. Review Bible passages identified, looking for common themes. How are the themes connected to each other? How are these common themes you identified seen in Ecclesiastes 4:13–5:7?

WHEN WORSHIPING (ECCL. 5:1-3)

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. 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. ³ Just as dreams accompany much labor, so also a fool’s voice comes with many words.

VERSE 1

Verse 1 contains the first of two admonitions concerning worship. The word *guard* is a warning that means “to be cautious” or “to be careful to do something.” It is the same word Moses used when he exhorted the Israelites to “keep the law” and “keep the Sabbath” (Deut. 4:40; 5:12). Here, ***guard your steps*** means to think carefully before taking action ***when you go to the house of God*** to worship.

Instead of approaching worship nonchalantly, one must approach worship reverently and circumspectly, recognizing there are

consequences to how one worships God. The worship God accepts is that which comes from a heart devoted to obeying Him. In contrast, **fools** think that as long as they make some religious gesture toward God, then their worship is acceptable to Him. They are ignorant of what it means to worship God because they believe expressions of worship are distinct from a life of **obedience**. However, the Scriptures are very clear that God will not accept the worship of the disobedient. (See Ps. 66:18.) Moreover, the prophet Samuel said obeying the Lord is more important than offering sacrifices to Him (1 Sam. 15:22). Our expressions of worship are an offense to God if they do not come from hearts submitted to Him. The fool does not know how dangerous it is to enter into worship with such disregard for God.

VERSES 2-3

The second admonition regarding worship is that people should be careful to abstain from saying something they really do not mean or that they would not say if they gave it more thought. This can happen when people sing songs with lyrics they do not mean or pray prayers that are just empty words or clichés. It means recognizing there is nothing one can say that will impress God or inform Him of something He does not already know. It means abstaining from making empty promises to God.

As the saying goes, “Think before you speak.” Why? Because just as those with a lot on their minds have trouble resting, so those who talk excessively cannot do so without sinning and getting themselves into trouble. Solomon’s instruction is similar to Jesus’ words to His disciples before He taught them the model prayer: “When you pray, don’t babble like the Gentiles, since they imagine they’ll be heard for their many words. Don’t be like them, because your Father knows the things you need before you ask him” (Matt. 6:7-8). It does not mean we should not pray. It just means we should be more focused on God and more mindful of who He is when we pray.

Why are worshipers prone to approach God with meaningless rituals instead of hearts for obedience?

WHEN PROMISING (ECCL. 5:4-7)

⁴ When you make a vow to God, don't delay fulfilling it, because he does not delight in fools. Fulfill what you vow. ⁵ Better that you do not vow than that you vow and not fulfill it. 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? ⁷ For many dreams bring futility; so do many words. Therefore, fear God.

VERSES 4-7

Verses 4-6 have as their background Moses' teaching in Deuteronomy 23:21-23 concerning making **a vow to God**. A vow involved an oath to God promising to offer something to Him if He would act on behalf of the individual making the vow. Sometimes people make vows in the midst of great danger or need, but sometimes it is out of great desire. For instance, Hannah was unable to have children. So she went to the tabernacle and vowed to God that if He gave her a son, she would "give him to the LORD all the days of his life." In grateful response to the Lord's granting her request, her husband offered a vow offering on their behalf in gratitude for what God had done (1 Sam. 1:9-28).

It is foolish to take what is a delight to the Lord and turn it into self-centered grandstanding.

God never required anyone to make a vow to Him. Therefore, failing to keep a voluntary vow to the Lord in His house was a serious offense and equated to breaking the third commandment, which forbids the misuse of the Lord's name (Ex. 20:7; see also Lev. 19:12). God's final words in Leviticus warn of the costliness of breaking a vow (Lev. 27). The voluntary act of making a vow to God was the highest worship one could offer God. Voluntary expressions of worship are more a blessing to God than doing only what is required. For this reason, it is foolish to take what is a delight to the Lord and turn it into self-centered grandstanding before Him, acting as if one delights in God when in truth that person just seeks to advance himself or herself with grand promises.

What does the expectation of keeping a vow made to God reveal about the true nature of worship? How does this expectation relate to the character of God?

God expects His people to keep their commitments. People often look for ways to back out of their commitments to God and others. It dishonors God when we refuse or fail to keep our word. Therefore, it would be better never to make a vow than to make one ***and not fulfill it.***

The Teacher's admonition is "Do not sin with your mouth or complain about your commitments to God to His minister" (***messenger*** probably refers to a temple servant). Failure to keep one's promises to God robs God of the honor and worship He deserves and robs the individual of the blessings and honor that come from God to those who keep their vows. Lying to God has serious consequences, and just in case one thinks this is only an Old Testament teaching, one should recall Ananias and Sapphira who lost their lives because they lied to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:1-11). We must be like the psalmist in Psalm 66:13-15 who determined to keep his vows to the Lord.

Having ***dreams*** of what one might do for God and expressing elaborate plans to serve Him mean nothing to Him apart from faithful obedience. What matters to God and should therefore matter to every individual is that we live our lives in complete devotion to Him. This is what it means to ***fear God.***

Why is it better to refrain from making a vow to God than making a vow and not keeping it?

KEY DOCTRINE: *Scripture*

Scripture reveals the principles by which God judges us (Rom. 2:1-5).

APPLY THE TEXT

- Christian leaders must willingly listen to wise counsel when leading.
- Believers are to worship God in reverent obedience.
- Wise believers carefully weigh the promises they make to God and others, knowing God will expect them to keep any promises made.

Discuss as a group ways of encouraging each other to listen to wise counsel. What role does your Bible study group and church play in helping others find and listen to wise counsel?

List reasons why believers in times of corporate worship should prioritize listening to God and how they may do so. How can you give greater priority to listening to God through worship?

What promises to God have you made that you have yet to fulfill? What keeps you from fulfilling that promise? What steps do you need to take to move closer to fulfilling your promise?

PRAYER NEEDS
