

Ecclesiastes And Christian Living (Part Six): Listening

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The previous article completed the first third of the book of Ecclesiastes. Solomon, having laid the foundation for the entire book, is now exploring important details. A brief overview of that foundation may be helpful as we go forward. It is useful to remember four important points to gain a better understanding:

1. Ecclesiastes contains no prophecies.
2. It does not present Christ as Savior.
3. It contains no “thus saith the Lord” commands from on high.
4. Satan is never mentioned.

Ecclesiastes is all about quality-of-life issues, helping us set and follow daily guidelines to direct our lives. Throughout the book, primarily by means of comparisons, Solomon helps us to analyze which choices are better. For the Christian, then, life comes down to one important question: How shall I make the best daily use of my calling? Ecclesiastes helps us to answer this vital question by providing practical guidelines intended for day-by-day use in our lives.

We have learned from personal experience that life is not only merely difficult, but it is also very much like a convoluted labyrinth. Making right choices to follow the correct path is not always easily discerned. Each section of Ecclesiastes that we have completed to this point has presented us with overall perspectives and guidelines to give us principles to live by.

For example, the introduction in the first chapter highlights the apparent meaninglessness of human life “under the sun.” Everybody faces what God clearly exposes in this chapter. Solomon gives two helpful clues: First, the phrase “under the sun” indicates a life, regardless of how full and productive it may appear to casual observation, lived with little thought of God and His purpose for His creation. What is the lesson? Avoid this!

The second clue is to note that the meaninglessness of human life is *apparent*. Life is in no way meaningless to those called of God. It *appears* meaningless to casual observation because God has not yet opened the minds of the vast majority to remove the spiritual blindness by which Satan has deluded them.

Thus, to the blinded, life can appear to have no purposeful direction because the same general events keep happening over and over again regardless of when and where one lives. It is as though human life is lived like a hamster on a treadmill. There is endless activity and movement, but one gets nowhere. An important overall conclusion can thus be discerned: Ecclesiastes gives important guidelines to provide direction to the called so that they can live their lives purposefully, moving toward the goal God has revealed. Ecclesiastes is written especially for their benefit.

Chapter 2 begins to focus on elements of life important to the purpose God is revealing to the called. Solomon writes about work, pleasure, and entertainment, and within each subject, he evaluates what is wise and what is of lesser value. Here, he first indicates that contentment with God's gifts is important to the life of the called. We must not let our minds wander to what we do not have, a habit that is particularly destructive to accomplishment. We must be positively thankful for what we have because what we have is God's calling and knowledge of His purpose. This is a huge benefit.

The third chapter is vital to the called because it decisively inserts God into the flow of life, showing Him initiating, directing, and judging events in our lives. What He provides are events or exercises that help prepare us for His Kingdom. It is a tremendously encouraging chapter. We are not alone! God is personally and deeply involved in the lives of the called to provide help to fulfill the purpose toward which He is directing us. His purpose involves eternity, and thus life has a definite point toward which He is drawing it. This chapter urges us to get in harmony with it. It reveals Him as deeply involved in the timing, both the beginning and ending, of the events of our lives.

From the inspiring teachings of chapter 3, the next one returns us to the corrupt world we live and move in. Solomon reminds us of the unjust courts and the oppressions of this present evil world. However, he also reminds us that God is judging, implying that we must not be distraught and allow ourselves to become caught up in the world's problems. We are to stay focused. God is taking care of things.

Solomon also compares work attitudes to allow us to examine our own and choose which one will produce the most toward God's Kingdom. He briefly examines the workaholic, the lazybones, the balanced man, and the miser. He also touches on the value of companionship and cooperation within partnerships, and he admonishes us briefly about pride, the instability of civic life, and the fickleness of the public. Once again, he also strongly suggests that choosing to be content is a necessary quality.

Along these lines, Solomon begins analyzing many daily life experiences, describing them in such a way as to point out what the better choices are. While leaving the decisions to us, he provides enough detail that, if we are serious about pleasing and glorifying God, we will choose this rather than that.

A Visit to the Temple

After making the observations and comparisons that appear in chapter 4, Solomon pays a visit to the House of God to evaluate what he sees reflected in the attitudes and conduct of those worshipping the Creator God directly within their relationship with Him. His conclusions are important to the well-being of the maintenance of this most-important-of-all relationship:

Walk prudently when you go to the house of God; and draw near to hear rather than to give the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they do evil. Do not be rash with your mouth, and let not your heart utter anything hastily before God. For God is in heaven, and you on earth; therefore let your words be few. For a dream comes through much activity, and a fool's voice is known by his many words. When you make a vow to God, do not delay to pay it; for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you have vowed. It is better not to vow than to vow and not pay. Do not let your mouth cause your flesh to sin, nor say before the messenger of God that it was an error. Why should God be angry at your excuse and destroy the work of your hands? For in the multitude of dreams and many words there is also vanity. But fear God. (Ecclesiastes 5:1-7)

To those whom God has called, nobody is more important than God Himself. This should be self-evident because, to us, God is a reality, a family reality. However, we are not like those whom Solomon describes in chapter 1, those to whom life is essentially meaningless. It is not that the uncalled have no goals in life; that they do not plan what they will do with their time; that they are not buying or selling or repairing their homes, going to games or theaters, or seeking the latest fashions. Most of their lives are quite busy, involved in the normal activities of marrying, having children, divorcing, taking vacations, repairing their automobiles, going to work, and returning home at night to dine and read a book or watch television.

To many of them, involvement in a church is a portion of life, but God is not a reality to them in the way He must be to us because we truly believe Him and live by faith in Him. They may have some awareness and concern about Him. Yet, through the blood of Christ and the covenant we made with Him, we have dedicated our lives to Him. Thus, what God thinks, works on, and is planning are not guiding, overriding concerns to them as they are to us.

Recall that, in chapter 4, Solomon pays a visit to a courtroom and comes away critical of what he saw. He then goes to the marketplace and observes four different workers and the way they ply their trades. He then comments on partnership and the instability of civic life. All the while, he is speaking of the uncalled.

In chapter 5, Solomon visits the House of God. What he observes leaves him with foreboding thoughts about the spiritual state of those he saw. Until the specific context ends, it suggests that he is concerned about whether the worshippers are truly worshipping God in spirit and in truth. Chapter 5 directly addresses those whom God has called.

Perhaps we have seen a television program or movie in which a family grumpily staggers through dressing for Sunday morning church, arguing with each other about what they will or will not wear. They continue on to services in the family car, either totally silent or bickering about things that irritate them. Then, as soon as they leave the car and enter the sanctuary doors, a broad smile creases their faces, and they are polite to all who greet them. When they sing a hymn, their eyes are reverently closed, and on their faces are rapturous expressions, as if they are about to be transported to heaven itself. When services are over, they fly out the door and back to the dog-eat-dog real world. That quickly, their behaviors and attitudes return to normal.

All of this is, of course, a huge exaggeration, but it makes clear that attitudes and conduct can be flicked on or off depending on whom the person wants to impress. This on-and-off attitude toward God is the very kind that is Solomon's concern.

Why? Because it indicates unresolved hypocrisy. Undoubtedly, Solomon observed people whom he deemed were not consistently and faithfully sincere about God in relation to their lives. The context gives the impression that their worship of God was confined to their appearance at the Temple on the Sabbath. But what about the rest of life?

Be Careful to Include God

Each of Solomon's analyses in chapter 4 involves an aspect of daily life. Whether the subject is the courts, the manner that a worker addresses his labors, a partnership, or a life of public service, he makes not even a single mention of God. By way of contrast, where does God fit into the lives of those he observes in chapter 5?

It is interesting that, in the New King James Version, verse 1 begins, “Walk prudently when you go to the house of God.” The King James Version reads, “Keep your foot when you go to the house of God.” *Prudently* indicates “with care.” “Keep your foot” can just as easily be translated as “watch your step,” which is also a warning to be careful. Careful of what? Following the previous chapter where God is not even hinted at, chapter 5, in which Solomon is observing people going to the House of God, implies a warning to be careful not to leave God entirely out of life.

More positively, we can also take it as an admonishment to make sure that we strive to keep Him actively involved in our lives because at baptism we gave Him a solemn promise always to submit to Him in every facet of life. We have been converted to serve Him. Recall Jesus’ admonition in Luke 14:26-27:

If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.

Thus, before committing our lives to Him in baptism, we are strongly counseled that we must count the cost of Him being first in our lives.

Were the attitudes and conduct of those whom Solomon observed such that they were robbing God of the reverence, honor, and respect that He deserves? Were their acts of worship perfunctory, insincere, and hypocritical? Our so-far cursory reading of the context has provided us with a clue: Solomon does not direct the admonishment of chapter 5 toward those who have no relationship with God at all, but he focuses it on those who do have a relationship with Him. They have specifically gone to the House of God, ostensibly to continue the relationship.

However, additional information reveals that, though they have good intentions, their minds wander easily. They find it hard to focus, to give Him their full attention, and to follow through in obedience. This is another gentle reminder to the called of God that in our lives *everything matters*. Going to the House of God is most definitely not a time to lose focus and let down in our discipline.

To help drive this thought home, notice the next phrase in verse 1. It speaks of those who “draw near to God” but who “give the sacrifice of fools.” “Draw near” clearly describes people who are doing something about their relationship with God, which shows a good intention. The word “sacrifice” indicates something given in the behalf of another, as Christ sacrificed His life in our behalf.

The subject here, though, is a foolish sacrifice. Christ’s sacrifice was not foolish in the least. These sacrifices are not *merely* foolish, however, because Solomon immediately elevates them to a far more serious level: as evil. English synonyms for the underlying Hebrew word translated as “evil,” are “bad” as a modifier and “wickedness” as a noun. Thus, what these people—who have a relationship with God and who are making a sacrifice in attending Temple services—are doing is far more dangerous than they appear to understand.

Strong’s Concordance adds that the Hebrew word behind “evil” combines both the deed and its consequences, indicating injury both to the perpetrator and to those around him. Solomon is saying that whatever these people are doing will do nobody any good. It is especially grievous in its effects to those who have a relationship with God because their actions either begin or sustain a destructive course.

Solomon's Counsel

We need to consider the counsel Solomon gives because it provides specific insight into the evils these people were committing. He says in verse 1, "Draw near to hear." In verse 2, he advises, "Do not be rash with your mouth," as well as, "let not your heart utter anything hastily before God" and "let your words be few." In verse 3, he states, "A fool's voice is known by his many words." Finally, back in verse 2, he counsels humility, "for God is in heaven, and you on earth." This comment implies that whatever they were doing was more serious than it appeared on the surface.

His initial counsel involves hearing, so we will look at several scriptures on that subject and its importance to us. Jesus says in Matthew 13:8-9: "But others fell on good ground and yielded a crop: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!" He gives the same sobering admonition in Matthew 13:41-43:

The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!

The first command to hear lies in the Parable of the Sower and the second in the Parable of the Wheat and Tares. Both have the same urgent sense and end with exclamation points, emphasizing urgent seriousness. The instruction on hearing in the Parable of the Sower is quite clear. Consider these factors in what Jesus said: The seed is the Word of God, so what the sower cast was good. In addition, the human soil the seed fell upon was also good.

However, one factor is still beyond the sower's power. The soil, that is, the person the seed fell on, has the power to allow or reject the seed's taking root by choosing to listen or not. That singular choice is of particular importance at this point in the parable. The same conclusion is true in verse 43 concerning the hearer choosing the Lake of Fire or the Kingdom of God. When Jesus uses the term "hear," He means more than just hearing audible sound; we also "hear" as we read His Word. He is thus emphasizing that people have the power to shut off hearing completely even though the Word of God enters their ears or their eyes and He has opened their minds to grasp it. It is the individual's responsibility to hear, consider, and then accept or reject it.

Mark 4:23-25 contains the same urgent warning, but he adds an additional truth that is important to us, a second lesson:

"If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear." And He said to them, "Take heed what you hear. With the same measure you use, it will be measured to you; and to you who hear, more will be given. For whoever has, to him more will be given; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him."

The lesson is that, not only must we first consciously turn on our hearing in order to be converted, but we must also selectively choose from among all we hear and thoughtfully accept or reject. In other words, we must discipline ourselves to be selective in order to grow, overcome, and glorify God.

Why are these elements of our conversion so important? Romans 10:16-17 provides a condensed foundational reason: “But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, ‘Lord, who has believed our report?’ So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.” Hearing may very well be our highest responsibility in our relationship with God because we must live by faith (Hebrews 11:38), and faith begins and is sustained by hearing. A blunt conclusion at this point is that hearing is serious business for the children of God.

Our Words Reveal the Heart

Now notice what God says about speaking:

Proverbs 10:19: “In the multitude of words sin is not lacking, but he who restrains his lips is wise.”

Proverbs 17:27: “He who has knowledge spares his words, and a man of understanding is of a calm spirit.”

James 1:19: “Therefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath.”

James 3:2: “For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body.”

Each of these well-known scriptures says essentially the same thing, and many others touch similarly on this subject, though less directly. So many verses give similar counsel about speech that one cannot help but understand the importance that God places on being careful about what we allow to leave our mouths. Matthew 12:35-37 drives this point home:

A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things. But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.

Speaking is a major aspect of character, providing a clear window into our hearts. A quotation often mistakenly attributed to Abraham Lincoln is apropos to the passage in Ecclesiastes 5:1-7: “Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak and remove all doubt.” What sets Solomon’s counsel apart from other verses on speaking is that the others are good advice for relationships in general. Solomon’s verses, however, are focused directly on a person’s relationship with God.

What do we talk about when we are before God? Before going any further, we should clarify the nature of being “before God.” Solomon says that we must not forget that God is in heaven and we are on earth, implying His sovereignty. Yet, he also mentions going to the House of God, implying a specific place and time we go before God. Is Solomon’s main concern here on God’s sovereignty or on the specific place? Since the unwritten but over-arching theme throughout Ecclesiastes is that everything in life matters, his main concern here is a gentle reminder that we are *always* before God.

The main issue of his counsel is not the number of words we say, though we are cautioned to be neither rash nor hasty, so our words should be few. Rather, the main thrust of his counsel lies in

verses 4-7. His concern is whether we thoughtfully follow through and keep our promises regardless of when, where, or to whom they are made, that is, unless following through would cause us to sin. The major sin that he is concerned about, despite not being directly stated, is ultimately the matter of hypocrisy.

Hypocrisy is misrepresenting who and what we really are. Solomon's concern is probably not deliberate hypocrisy but forgetfulness and carelessness in our witness. In other words, we cannot allow ourselves to let slip from our minds who we are and whom we represent. It is a matter of not being as disciplined and focused as we need to be. Focus is that important to the proper use of faith. Do we ever "let our hair down"? Is it possible that we display hypocrisy because we are not as zealous as we need to be?

Notice the string of clues in the terms he uses to reveal that undisciplined carelessness is the root of the problem, which triggers hypocrisy, a sin that a person can fall into without effort. He uses "fools" (three times), "rash," "hastily," "do not let," "do not delay," "error," "excuse," and "words be few." Overall, he paints a picture of a person of undisciplined mind who prattles about whatever amuses him at the time without considering the effects of what he is saying. He is later caught and exposed by, as Solomon says, the messenger of God.

I Peter 1:13 and James 1:22 provide sound counsel about what must be done to eliminate the accusations of a loose tongue. I Peter 1:13 charges us to, "Gird up the loins of your mind," and James 1:22 adds, "But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves." Remaining focused on achieving the goal set before us to follow through in obedience to God will meet the responsibility of paying all our vows to God.

Sometimes, it slips our minds that we made a covenant with God, and in return for our pledge, gave Him our lives as living sacrifices. That covenant seals our holy promise to Him that, if He will forgive our sins based on our repentance and faith in Christ's sacrifice, we in turn will devote our lives in service to Him. Thus, we must keep our wits about us because, though God is merciful, everything should matter to us.

The "messenger of God" Solomon mentions is anybody or any circumstance that triggers the revelation in our minds that we have sinned or are continuing in a sin. Thus, Solomon is showing that God is faithful to bring the knowledge of our sins to mind so that we might repent, and that, of course, causes us a measure of disappointment that we have once again fallen short and failed to honor and glorify God.

A Summation at the Halfway Point

In order to fit within the context of the preceding verses, "dreams" in verse 7 does not mean the random mental activity a person has while sleeping and over which he has little or no control. Rather, it indicates the wanderings of a person's mind while seemingly fully awake—in other words, daydreams. For the most part, daydreams are nothing but sheer vanity, time-wasting drifts of the mind that lead nowhere positive. While daydreaming, we are not focused and disciplined, which is the opposite of what God desires of us.

Something else is of interest here. This verse contains both the major concepts that the book begins with, that is, vanity and the thought or goal the book ends with, "Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man." Halfway through the book, Solomon is directly

declaring what the urgent aim of every life needs to be. We need to proceed from the meaninglessness of an under-the-sun life to the fulfillment of life's purpose through fearing God, as shown in living an over-the-sun life.

The way to get and stay right with God is encapsulated in these seven verses. It can be stated in three simple principles:

1. Do not just hear God, *listen* to Him carefully with focused attention.
2. Speak with a matching level of focused attention.
3. Follow through in obedience to what we vowed when we committed ourselves to making the New Covenant.

A tension exists in what Solomon counsels us regarding our relationship with God. Though we may not think of it all the time, we understand that, for our own good, God demands our highest allegiance. We willingly accept that because we believe the gospel, knowing who He is and what He offers us. However, being human, we are sometimes easily distracted. There are times that we would rather do almost anything else short of an outright sin than to listen attentively to what God says.

Constant Distraction

The next section covers Ecclesiastes 5:8-12:

If you see the oppression of the poor, and the violent perversion of justice and righteousness in a province, do not marvel at the matter; for high official watches over high official, and higher officials are over them. Moreover the profit of the land is for all; the king himself is served from the field. He who loves silver will not be satisfied with silver; nor he who loves abundance, with increase. This also is vanity. When goods increase, they increase who eat them; so what profit have the owners except to see them with their eyes? The sleep of a laboring man is sweet, whether he eats little or much; but the abundance of the rich will not permit him to sleep.

Matthew 19:21-24 adds an important truth to help us understand these verses:

“If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.” But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. Then Jesus said to His disciples, “Assuredly, I say to you that it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”

First, the rich young man was so preoccupied by his material wealth that he really did not *hear* that Christ was offering him eternal life. Second, *anything* of this earth that we truly treasure can potentially influence us to so increase our fear of losing it as to cause us to choose not to hear Christ. The treasure does not have to be money. Third, no matter how great the distractive power of what we consider valuable, God stands ready to save us from it. Jesus did not say it was impossible.

No doubt, Solomon wants to help us with this spiritual struggle. He uses money as his main illustration because everybody easily relates to it. However, he does not introduce the subject of money until Ecclesiastes 5:10. Instead, he writes of social injustice within the worldly system we live and function in. Why? Because the system itself is a constant source of distraction through its constant barrage of news reports in which we hear of social injustice. Most often, the poor are its targets.

He cautions us not to be astonished by the vanity of all this injustice, but at the same time, he wants us to be aware of it. He does this in verse 8 by mentioning “a high official watches over a high official, and higher officials are over them.” He seems to be saying that from bottom to top, the entire system is corrupt; every stratum of the culture struggles to make its way by taking advantage of others. Nevertheless, none of this injustice is an excuse for us to involve ourselves in the “everybody’s doing it” routine and sin too.

A key to understanding what Solomon is driving at is the word translated “watches.” In Hebrew, the term can be used either positively or negatively. Positively, a person watches to protect or help, and negatively, he may have circumstances under surveillance to gain personal advantage from them. The present context is definitely negative. Solomon is still describing the self-centered attitudes of those “working” the system. Like their political leaders, ordinary citizens also greedily watch to gain the best and most for themselves. Their approach is not to serve and share. Verse 9 confirms that this self-centered attitude goes all the way to the top—to the king. He, too, is served by the corrupt system.

God has deemed it our responsibility to prepare for His Kingdom by overcoming, growing, and being loyal to Him and His way within such a circumstance as Solomon describes in these last few verses. Our hope is promised in Isaiah 9:6-7:

For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, to order it and establish it with judgment and justice from that time forward, even forever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this.

The solution to this present evil world is on the horizon, but it will not come until Jesus Christ is here with us on earth. Thus, God has willed that we must deal with the corrupt and unjust system that now is, looking forward in hope to the relief of Christ’s return.