

How to Approach God Carefully

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 11 February 2024

Preacher: Nick Louw

[0 : 0 0] I want to start by asking you a question. How careful are you when you pray? If you pray. I'm not assuming everyone here prays. I'm not assuming everyone is a Christian.

But you're in church or you're listening to a sermon online. You most likely are a Christian, even if it's just by name only. And therefore you probably pray. My question to you is, how careful are you when you do that? How much thought do you put into what you're praying?

How much preparation do you put into your approach to God? Or do you just start and just whatever comes out? Think about that. How careful are you when you approach God?

That is the question that Ecclesiastes now considers here in chapter 5 of his book, How to Approach God Carefully. And it's an important question and it's one that I don't think we often think about. But why now is he dealing with that question here in Ecclesiastes 5?

Well the reason is, so far, if you've been with us the last few weeks, you'll know where we've gone and what Ecclesiastes is about. So far, Ecclesiastes, the philosopher of life, has examined every possible way to live a satisfying life under the sun.

[1 : 2 4] Right? In this world, in the lives we live, in the lives we can see, how do we live a satisfying life? That's the question that he's given himself to tackle. How we can live a satisfying life under the sun.

And he was one of the few people in history who actually had all the resources available to perform that experiment. And he tried. With pleasure. With wealth. With academic achievements. With building projects. With raw power to rule.

And he looked at each of those things, each of those ways to live a satisfying life. And each single one of them came up short. We've been seeing. He's realized that at the end, they're all futile. And they're all ultimately frustrating.

What he calls a chasing after the wind. Satisfaction that you can never actually grab. And so here, kind of halfway through the book, he turns to consider another way. A religious approach to life.

Namely, to stop going after what this life offers and rather, to go after the God who gave it to us. But even that has its problems.

[2 : 3 6] Because as he starts considering that in chapter 5, it turns out that going after God is not as simple as it seems.

And yet those who learn how to approach God carefully, to approach God rightly, just may discover the key to a satisfying life on earth.

And that's what we're going to look at this morning. How to approach God carefully. Now, a major lesson in the Old Testament of the Bible, if you're familiar with the Bible, you'll know.

A major lesson there is that you can't just approach God. You can't just walk up to the Holy God of the universe. You can't just amble up like he's your buddy. There are rules in approaching God.

And we see that throughout the Old Testament. And those rules are there for our safety. And so remember when we were working through Exodus? When God decided to make himself known to humans and he came in a very real way.

[3 : 46] His presence came to earth to dwell with them. The first time he approached the Israelites, he was high up on Mount Sinai. And he said, don't come close. Remember that?

When we were doing Exodus? They had to stay at the bottom of the mountain. He was at the top. He wanted relationship with people. But for their safety, he put boundaries in place. The same as when they constructed the tabernacle according to God's design.

There were all these boundaries. There were all these divisions. To be careful that people, sinners, didn't come too close to a holy God. And of course that was carried over in the temple.

The design of the temple in Israel. And there were these priests who had to go through elaborate rituals of purification and atonement for sin. Just so that the people could even draw near to come to the temple to have this kind of relationship with God in the Old Testament.

The point of all that, one of the major lessons that come out of the Bible's Old Testament, is that sinners can't just walk up carelessly to a holy God. You know, just as much as you can't walk straight into a nuclear reactor and think that nothing's going to happen.

[4 : 56] It's dangerous for sinners to draw near a holy God. And Ecclesiastes, as a wise man, realizes this. And so here he says the same thing.

Be very careful in how you approach God as a sinful human being. And that's why he starts chapter 5 like this. Have a look from verse 1. Guard your steps when you go to the house of God.

The house of God, of course, he's referring to the Israelite temple. And so he's saying even when you do take the way that God has given us to approach Him, be careful in how you do it.

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 what they are doing or do not know that they do wrong.

Verse 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.

[6 : 02] Don't you love that? You know, I'm really convinced we should start that line of Ecclesiastes fridge magnets that I mentioned in the first verse. This would be a great candidate, hey?

God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few. The point he's making is when you presume to approach the God of the universe, you need to first take stock and realize who He is and who you are.

That's vital. If you need two pieces of information to approach God wisely, you need to understand who He is. God is in heaven and who you are.

You are on earth. And that requires a certain amount of reverence. Reverence. It's vital that when we approach this God, we revere Him.

We approach Him with due reverence for who He is and who we are. And the same is true today as well, because that is still the case. When we approach God, we need to realize what we're doing.

[7 : 13] When you presume to approach God in your life to hear from Him or to speak to Him, you need to realize who He is and who you are.

When you come to church, you've got to take seriously what we're doing. This is not just coming to hear a motivational talk. This is something much more profound.

When we gather together by the power of the Spirit under God's Word, we are coming to meet with the living God. We are coming to hear Him speak through His Word as it's unpacked by a human.

But nonetheless, God is speaking through this process. And so when we come to church, when you come to church, you need to pay attention. Because of who you're coming to hear from.

This hour and a half that you spend in church is not like any other hour in the week. This is a divine human interaction here. And we need to take that seriously.

[8 : 18] And so, verse 1, Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools. You know what that means?

To offer the sacrifice of fools is just go to do your religious duty. Or just go through the religious motions because it's what you do every week. That's the sacrifice of fools. When you don't realize what you're actually doing and you're just doing it because you're a Christian and you do it.

That's the sacrifice of fools. I wonder if you often find yourself just going through the motions of church. Just coming here because it's what you do on a Sunday and people expect you to be here.

And the pastor is going to hassle you if you're not. Or, you know, just singing the songs because the words are up on screen. Just, you know, listening half-heartedly to the sermon. Also thinking about what you're going to do later this afternoon.

You know, if you're just going through the motions, the Bible says that is the sacrifice of fools. You do not realize what you're doing here. So be careful when you come to church.

[9 : 18] Also be careful when you pray. When you pray at home, when you pray in private. Pray carefully. Verse 2. Do not be quick with your mouth.

Do not be hasty in your heart to utter up anything before God. Just as Jesus says, do not babble on like the pagans do. Think before you pray.

Realize when you pray, you are talking to the living God. Who is there in heaven.

Surrounded in glory. And if you pray through Christ, He actually hears your words. The words that come out of your mouth if you're praying through Jesus. Are being heard in heaven.

By real ears. Okay? Real beings and a real living God. Your words matter. So use them carefully.

[10 : 19] Also, be very careful when you promise anything to God. Have a look at verse 4 and 5. When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools.

Fulfill your vow. In fact, it is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it. Have you ever done that? Made a promise to God?

Maybe you've tried to make a deal with Him. God, if you do this for me, I promise I will come to church every Sunday. As if God needs you to come to church.

When in fact, it's something that you need far more than you'll ever know. Or, Lord, if you help me to get this contract, I promise I will give 20% of it to the church.

Just help me to get that. Really? You think you can negotiate? You think God is like some kind of street trader you can negotiate with? No, that's irreverent.

[11 : 24] You don't do that with God. And it's stupid. Because you probably won't keep your end of the bargain anyway. God is in heaven.

And you are on earth. So let your words be for you. Realize who God is. And who you are. Before you presume to approach Him. And it's vital we do this.

It's vital that we take this wisdom from the Old Testament. From Ecclesiastes. To just sober up and be careful in how we approach God. How we think about God.

How we relate to God. Before we approach Him. Because the more we do that. The more we get into the habit of approaching God carefully in our lives. The more and more we'll realize how unworthy we are to do that.

The more that will become real for us. The more we won't presume that we can just approach God. You know the holiest people in the Bible are the ones who were fearful when they approached the living God.

[12 : 31] Take prophet Isaiah for example. When he approached the presence of God he fell down as a dead man. And he said unworthy am I. But he was probably still the most worthy person in Israel.

But he realized he wasn't actually. He was a sinner the same as all of us. And we're not worthy to approach a holy God. We have chosen our own way. We've turned our back on God by nature. We want to live our own lives.

We've sinned. We've cut ourselves off from the holy God. We have no right to now try to turn back and approach Him. And so the more you approach God carefully.

The more you'll realize how unworthy you are to do that. But also the more you'll realize how much you need Jesus. If you are going to successfully approach God. So listen to what 1 Peter 3 verse 18 says.

He says for Christ died for sins once for all. The righteous for the unrighteous. To bring you to God.

[13 : 33] That's why Christ died. Very simply. To bring you to God. Without that. Without the death of Christ 2,000 years ago. There would be no way that you as a sinner can be brought to God.

There would be no way that you could bridge that gap. And approach this holy God. Christ died. He came to this earth to bring you to God. And so. Yes.

What Ecclesiastes says is true. God is in heaven. And you are on earth. But. The Son of God. Came from heaven. To earth.

So that you on earth. Can get an audience with God in heaven. God is in heaven. You are on earth. But Jesus came to bridge that gap. So that you can get an audience.

With the living God. Not by your own merits. Never by your own merit. But solely because Jesus died. For the sins that would otherwise keep you away. From God.

[14 : 33] That is why. He himself. Called. Him. himself. The temple. The temple. The temple. That is why the apostles. In the New Testament. Refer to Jesus as.

Our temple. The temple in the Old Testament. Was the place. Of all the world. Where you could actually come. And approach the living God. Yes. The rest of the world had their. Their idols.

And their made up gods. But this temple. For a time in history. Was the place that you could actually come. And. Have contact with the true God. The holy God. Well Jesus is now our temple.

He is the only place. On earth. That sinners can. Actually approach. The true God. Because he is the only one. Who has died an atoning death. For sins.

And so that. Is how. We approach God. Carefully. Today. Realizing. That it is only. In. Jesus.

- [15 : 30] That we can ever get near. That is how you approach God. Carefully. In. Ephesians. 3. Verse 12. Says. In.
- Him. We may approach God. In. Him. Inside. Him. We may approach God. And only in him. May we approach God.
- Safely. And carefully. In him. I like how you safely approach lions. In Kruger National Park. How do you approach a lion. In Kruger National Park. In a car.
- Okay. Then. Then you can enjoy. Being in the presence of these majestic. Creatures. And that is reverence. To actually stay in your car.
- A lot of people haven't had reverence for lions. And they've. Paid the price for it. You stay in your car. Because you revere the lions. Well. How much more do we need. Reverence. For the God.
- [16 : 28] The living God. Who is far more dangerous. To sinners. Than any lion. How much more. Do we therefore need to realize. That it is only in Christ.
- That we can do that. Okay. Just as much as it is. Is only safely. In a car. That you can approach. The danger of the lions. That is only in Christ.
- He is our vehicle. He is our. He is the. The one that covers us. Only in Christ. Can we approach. This living God. As C.S. Lewis.
- Puts it well. God is good. But he's not safe. For a sinner. Unless you're in Christ. Unless you're covered.
- In Christ. Now that of course. Doesn't undermine. The confidence. We should have an approaching God. Right. So.
- [17 : 27] So Christians can be confident. To come to God as our father. We have that great privilege. In Christ. Just as you can be confident. In. When you're in a car. In Kruger National Park.
- You can have confidence. The same confidence. We can actually have coming. Right into the presence of God. Knowing that the living God. Hears. Our words. But that shouldn't. Take away the reverence.
- We have for him. As we do that. That's. The mistake that Christians often make. Is thinking that because we can approach. God. Confidently in Christ. That we. We don't need to approach him reverently.
- Still. We do. You know. Even Jesus. Approached his father. With deep. Reverence. Let me read to you from.
- Hebrews 5. Hebrews 5. Verse 7. Listen to this. During the days of Jesus life on earth.
- [18 : 23] He offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears. To the one who could save him from death. And he was heard because of his reverence.
- Jesus was reverent. He approached his father. With reverence. How much more. Should we. How much more should we make sure that we don't carelessly.
- Just come into God's presence. But. Be careful. As we do. In. How we come to church. Let's get practical. How do we.
- Approach God carefully. As Christians. Well in how we come to church. Come earlier than. You know. 9. 29. Get ready.
- Come here and. And. And start to prepare. To hear from your living creator. Put aside. Distractions. Don't sit next to someone who you know is going to distract you.
- [19 : 20] And don't skip church for dumb reasons. I'm sorry but. There are a lot of dumb reasons I have for why people skip church. I was tired.

Well come on we're all tired. Okay. Go to bed a little earlier on Saturday night. Is that extra. Episode of your show on Netflix on Saturday night.

Worth. Missing out. What your living creator has to say to you this week. I don't think so. Go to bed a bit earlier. So that you're not tired. Don't use it as an excuse. Don't skip. Church.

For dumb reasons. In fact. As someone. Wisely said. You should make church the reason that you skip everything else. Same with our daily devotions.

When we approach God. In prayer. In our daily lives. Take those seriously. Take that time with God seriously. Start your day with it.

[20 : 17] Before your day gets busy with other stuff. Realize that that is the greatest thing you are going to do that day. Okay. So many people forget.

I'm guilty of it as well. Often. You forget to spend some time with God in prayer. It's just so busy this day. You know. Spending time.

Hearing from your creator. The God of the universe. Who causes the planets to spin. And orbit around the sun. That God is ready and willing to hear your voice.

Speaking to him and hearing from him. Is the greatest. Most profound thing you will do that day. Nothing can top it. Nothing can top it. And so take it seriously. You are going to be heard by a living God.

Take a moment to prepare. Before you just blurt out in prayer. Don't rush into it. Stop. Close the door. Find a quiet place. Find a quiet time in your day.

[21 : 19] And get ready. And get ready. To speak. To speak. To your God. God. And make sure. When you do that.

That you are completely and wholly in Christ. As you do. That he is truly your Lord. And you are truly his subject.

Because that is what it takes. To approach this God. God. Now you might be thinking.

Okay. Well if it takes so much. To approach God. Well why bother? You know. If it is not simple to approach God. Why bother?

Lots of people seem perfectly okay. Without a relationship with God. In their lives. They seem happy. They are doing their lives. Without any reference to God. You know. Maybe I will worry about that later.

[22 : 19] When I get older. When I am closer to death's door. Then I will start to think about approaching God. And sorting out the afterlife. Maybe that is you.

Maybe you are asking. Well. You know. Why bother? Having this relationship with God. Well. The answer of Ecclesiastes. In the rest of chapter 5.

And chapter 6. Is simple. It is this. Nothing else will satisfy you. That is what he goes on. To talk about now.

The fact that if you do not have. This relationship with your creator. You will never. Ultimately. Find satisfaction in life. I mean.

It is kind of a message. That has been. Implied. Throughout Ecclesiastes. But now. What he is doing. Is that he is contrasting. A lot of stuff that he has already said. You will see. If you read.

[23 : 14] Chapter 5 and 6. There is a lot of similarity. With what we have already covered. But now. He is actually contrasting. These attempts to find. Satisfaction elsewhere. With this living relationship with God.

With approaching God. In our lives. And why. Any life. Outside. Of a life. Lived in relationship with God. Is ultimately pointless. No matter. What. You can achieve.

So look. For example. At verse 10. Of chapter 5. Whoever loves money. Never has money enough. Whoever loves wealth.

Is never satisfied. With his income. This is. Meaningless. Why is that? Why is there this? I mean. It is true. Right? We have seen it already. In Ecclesiastes. The more you have.

The more you want. But why is that? Well. He actually. Puts it well. In the next chapter. Verse 7. Of chapter 6. Have a look at this. All man's efforts.

[24 : 09] Are for his mouth. Yet his appetite. Is never satisfied. All man's efforts. Is for his mouth. But his appetite. Is never satisfied.

In other words. We naturally live. To feed our desires. We all. Are driven by desires. You right now. Have certain desires. And that's what's going to drive. Your behavior. Whether it's desire.

For status. Or wealth. Or pleasure. Or sex. Or whatever. You. We learn. And we. Normally. As human beings.

We just live. To. Feed those desires. But no matter how much. We feed those desires. That never actually. Satisfies our appetites. We might feed our mouths.

But our appetites. Are never. Satisfied. You know. There's this disease. Called the Prader-Willi syndrome. I wonder if you've ever heard of it. It's a terrible.

[25 : 07] Disease. That many. People. I mean. It's rare. But lots of people. Still suffer from it. And. And one of the. Main. Symptoms. Of this. Prader-Willi syndrome.

Is. A constant hunger. That no matter how much you eat. You never get the sensation. Of being full. It must be terrible. Right. To have that disease. And you've got to actually.

Stop eating. Even when you feel hungry. Otherwise. It just leads to. Obviously. You know. You're going to overeat. But you know. That's how Ecclesiastes describes. Every life.

Lived without relationship. To God. It's a life. That is never full. No matter how much you consume. You will always. Still.

Feel. Hungry. In life. Unsatisfied. And the reason is. The reason that. Life lived outside of relationship.

[26 : 04] To God. Is like that. Is because. Only God can fill us. We were made. Created. By our creator. Only to find. True. Fulfillment.

In him. Not the gifts. That he gives us. But the giver himself. In relationship. With him. And if. He does not. Fill us. We will never. Be satisfied. Look at the beginning.

Of chapter one. For example. He says. Now this is just. Again. Him reflecting. On what he's observed. In life. And he's.

You know. He's known. A lot of rich people. In his life. And he says this. In observing their lives. I've seen. Another evil. Under the sun.

And it weighs. Heavily on men. Six. Verse two. God gives a man. Wealth. Possessions. And honor. So that he lacks. Nothing his heart desires. But God does not.

[26 : 59] Enable him. To enjoy. Them. And he's seen that. He's. He's observed life. And he's seen people. Have everything. They could ever want. And yet.

They can't enjoy it. But compare that. To just a few verses before. Look at. Chapter five. Verse nineteen. Right at the end of chapter five.

He says. Moreover. When God gives. Any man. Wealth. And possessions. And enables him. To enjoy them. To accept his lot. And to be happy. In his work. This is a gift of God.

The ability. To enjoy. What we have. The ability. To be satisfied. In whatever we have. Is actually a gift. From God. You can't get satisfaction. Yourself. You can get stuff. You can get money.

You can get career advancement. You can get whatever you want. But you can't get satisfaction. Yourself. God has to give it. As a gift. God alone. Is the one. Who is able. To make you content.

[27 : 58] God alone. Is the one. Who is able. To make you feel. Full. In life. And satisfied. God alone. The apostle Paul.

Is writing to. Christians. In 1st Timothy. And he says. These words. 1 Timothy.

Chapter 6. From verse 6. 2 Timothy. 2 Timothy. But godliness. With contentment. Is great gain.

For we brought nothing. Into the world. And we can take nothing. Out of it. But if we have food. And clothing. We will be content. With that. People. Who want. To get rich.

Fall into temptation. And a trap. And into many foolish. And harmful desires. That plunge men. Into ruin. And destruction. It's exactly. What Ecclesiastes.

[28 : 54] Is saying. The principles. Of Ecclesiastes. Are just repeated. In the New Testament. But godliness. With contentment.

Is great gain. True gain. We've covered this verse. Before in a previous sermon. But I'll remind you. Of what we discovered. True gain. Is not. About getting more stuff.

But it's about. Being satisfied. In what you have. That is how you gain. In life. But that can only happen. When you already have.

The one who gives you everything. The one who is. Everything. God himself. Remember. In our.

Growth groups. This week. We looked at the parable. Of the brothers. Otherwise known. As the parable. Of the prodigal son. But we discovered. It's actually the parable.

[29 : 49] About two sons. Not just the one. And. Right at the end of it. Remember what happened. The older brother. Is getting all grumpy. Because.

His dad. Gave. The prodigal son. Who returned. A big party. And a whole lot of gifts. And he said. Well you don't give me anything. You remember what the dad responds. He says.

You have me. And so everything I have. Is already yours. You see. When you have God.

Which is what that parable. Was pointing to. When you have relationship with him. You have everything. Everything. But do you. Do you have.

A living. Real relationship. With your creator. Who made you. And who gave you. Everything you have.

[30 : 46] And who gives you. Every breath you breathe. And who causes your heart. To continue to be. Do you have a living. Real relationship. With that God. Or are you just going. Through the motions.

Offering the sacrifice. Of fools. Do you have a relationship. With God. Where you find. Your fullness. In life. Or are you still.

Unsatisfied. Do you still have. A spiritual. Prader-Willi syndrome. Where you're never full. And you're constantly. Consuming. You're constantly. Trying to chase.

The next thing. You are driven. Not by. Seeking God. But by. Seeking things. In the world. Ask yourself. Is that what drives you. Pursuing things. That you think.

Will satisfy you. But never do. Because. Let me tell you. That. That drive. For things. That grasping. For things. In this world. That.

[31 : 40] Make. The thing. That makes you busy. Because you want. That next thing. You want to get. That next advancement. And that's the thing. That's driving you. That's the thing. That's making you busy. In life. You know what that's doing. That is keeping you.

From the one thing. That can satisfy you. Because. Think about it. That busyness. That makes you tired. Chasing things. Is keeping you from church. Often.

Keeping you from growth group. That busyness. In your day. That just gets you. On the treadmill. Right from the morning. Is keeping you. From daily devotions. It's keeping you. From spending. Proper time.

With God. Chasing the things. You think. Are going to satisfy you. Is actually the thing. Keeping you. From the one place. You can find satisfaction. Relationship with God.

Real living relationship. With God. That. Jesus. Came from heaven. To earth. And died. So you can have.

[32 : 37] That's how much. Jesus. Wanted you. To find satisfaction. In his father. Enough. That he came. Into this broken world.

Suffered along. With the rest of us. And died. An excruciating death. So that you. Can. Have your sins forgiven. And enter into relationship. With God. Don't take that. For granted. He would not have died.

If this wasn't. The one thing you need. More than anything else. To be. In this relationship. With God. Don't take that lightly.

And so approach God. Carefully. In Jesus Christ. And realize. That in that relationship.

You will. Come to find. Everything you think the world can give you. And so much more. Let's pray. Heavenly Father.

[33 : 46] We approach you. In reverence. We thank you. That you hear us. As we. As a church. As a community. Of believers. Come to you now.

And we thank you. That we can do this. We thank you. That you have made this way. For us. To hear your word. That your spirit. Is present with us.

Teaching us. Lord. To hear your word. To hear your word. To hear your word. And. Lord. Help us not to take that lightly. And forgive us. For when we. Fail.

To believe. That in you. Is everything. We need. Forgive us Lord. For neglecting. The great privilege.

You've given us. Of being able to know. And be known. By our heavenly creator. Help us. As we go into this week. To repent.

[34 : 41] Of chasing after. Other things. For satisfaction. And to reorient. Our. Schedules. And our lives. So that we prioritize. You. And we find great.

And deep. Joy. In those times. We spend with you Lord. Help us to do that. More and more. So that we may. Truly. Enjoy.

And benefit. From the very thing. Jesus. Died. To give us. In Jesus name. We pray. Amen.