

Let my words be few

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[0 : 01] Let's get ready now to hear from God and let's come to him in prayer. Father, as we come before you now, we pray Lord that we will not treat your word lightly or casually.

We pray that we will come with reverence but also with expectation that you would change us and transform us. That you will lead us onto the paths of obedience and that you will lead us onto the paths of joy because we know that you are our God and we are your children.

We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. Some places have warning signs. If you were to visit a construction site, for example, you will probably see plenty of those yellow triangular signs that say things like danger, falling objects or keep clear of moving machinery.

Or if you are at an electrical substation, you might see one of those signs with a rather fierce lightning symbol on it and with the words warning, high voltage. And that's because the place has elements that are potentially dangerous to you.

But one place you wouldn't normally see any warning sign is church. Well, why should I, you might ask? You know, this is not a place for yellow triangles. But listen to what the guy who gave us the message paraphrase of the Bible has to say on the screen.

[1 : 37] Sometimes, I think that all religious sites should be posted with signs reading. Beware the God. The places and occasions that people gather to attend to God are dangerous.

There are glorious places and occasions, true, but there are also dangerous. Dangerous signs should be conspicuously placed as they are at nuclear power stations.

Now, why would Eugene Peterson say that? After all, surely church should be a safe place. Surely God himself should be the safest place you could run to.

Well, yes and no. You see, as Eugene Peterson goes on to write, religion is the death of some people.

What he means is this. Yes, church and God are the safest places you could go to, if you approach God rightly. But if you don't, if you come with a spirit of dead religiosity, if you engage in worship that is purely superficial, you are in a very dangerous place indeed.

[2 : 58] Why? Well, I know that we are in Ecclesiastes, but let's just make a brief detour to the book of Amos to see why. In Amos 5, verse 21 to 23, the prophet tells us what God thinks about dead religion.

I hate, I despise your religious festivals. Your assemblies are a stench to me. Even though you bring me burn offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them.

Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs. I will not listen to the music of your harps.

God is essentially telling Israel their worship is worthless. Oh, it might have been elaborate and sophisticated. After all, they had burn offerings for atonement and grain offerings as tokens of thanksgiving.

They had special people called priests, then holy festivals, and holy sites. But God says it's all disgraceful. Why?

[4 : 06] Why? Well, the earlier part of Amos tells us, look at Amos 5, verse 12, for example. For I know how many are your offenses and how great your sins.

They are those who oppress the innocent and take brides and deprive the poor of justice in the courts. So Israel claimed to worship God while blatantly doing the opposite with the rest of their lives.

And that is a dangerous thing. For when we look at how God is described in Amos, we know that he is someone that we should not mess around with.

He is a roaring lion, 3, verse 8. He is the God of armies, 5, verse 15. He can darken day into night and reduce a fortified city into ruins in a matter of seconds.

5, verse 8. This is our God. And if we offer him nothing but empty worship, well, no other Eugene Peterson says that religion will actually result in our death.

[5 : 20] Our teacher in Ecclesiastes knows this too. And that's why in today's passage, he puts up a warning sign. Guard your steps, he says in verse 1.

Fear God, he says in verse 7. Don't be a fool. Three times in these seven verses, he makes references to fools.

This is a big concern for him because, verse 4, God takes no pleasure in fools. So don't be one. And his warning isn't for people who never go to church. Actually, he's warning those who make it a habit week after week to show up for Sunday service.

Guard your steps when, not if, you go to the house of God. Now, in the Old Testament, the house of God referred to God's temple.

[6 : 27] It's where God chose to dwell with his people. That's what he always wanted from the beginning of time. And that's why when you look closely at the architectural details of the temple, you would find lots of things there that recall the Garden of Eden, such as lampstands that look like trees and sculptures of angels.

You see, the house of God is really about God wanting to connect with his people rather than about the building itself magnificent as it was.

And that's why when Jesus comes, he is described in John's Gospel as the house of God personified because he is the one in whom we can now draw near to God.

He renders the physical building obsolete. But today, there is still a house of God. When Jesus went back to heaven, he sent his spirit to dwell among us.

And he says, because Christians are now where God dwells, it is the Christian community who has now become the very house of God, not some physical building.

[7 : 56] And so, as believers in Christ, we are still to guard our steps when we gather with the rest of God's people in the name of Christ.

We are to hear the teachers saying, don't take church for granted. Don't coast. Don't sleep walk.

Don't come unprepared as you meet God together with other Christians.

It's dangerous to do so. don't be a fool. But if so, then how should we guard our steps?

How should we make sure that we are not indulging in empty worship? Well, today the teacher turns practical. He says to us, here are three things not to forget as we worship together.

Here are three actions to take. Let's think about each of those in turn. Firstly, listen attentively.

[9 : 05] For the first time in this book, the teacher moves from reflection to instruction. And the first thing he wants us to understand is that we come to church to listen.

Come with your ears wide open. That's why God has assembled us together. true worship begins not with us speaking but with us listening.

After all, remember what we heard last week? God made us for connection and especially connection with him. And so it's no surprise he wants to speak to us.

and as in any relationship if we wanted to work we mustn't talk all the time. We must listen.

And that's how it's always been. Listen for instance to Moses recall the day when the people gathered at Mount Sinai or Horeb as it's sometimes known after they had been redeemed from Egypt.

[10 : 18] Deuteronomy chapter 4 verse 10 on the screen. Remember the day you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb when he said to me assemble the people before me to hear my words so that they may learn to revere me as long as they live in the land and may teach them to their children.

So notice to learn to worship God we must listen. To learn to obey God we must listen.

Listening matters. On that great day Israel saw no visible form of God. In fact one of the ten commandments that they received on that day specifically forbade them from making physical representations of Yahweh in their worship.

All they heard was a voice. But that was sufficient. They didn't need statues or images or visions unlike the Canaanites or the other people groups around them.

It was God's word that mattered. And that is a pattern that's consistently seen throughout. Later on in Deuteronomy God promises to raise another prophet just like Moses.

[11 : 48] And when such a prophet arises what are we to do? Well it's on the screen Deuteronomy 18 verse 15. You must listen to him. Why?

Because God's word will be in his mouth. And then when Jesus comes and appears on a mountain in all his glory outshining even Moses and Elijah the premier prophets of the Old Testament.

What does God tell us to do? Look at Mark 9 verse 7. This is my son whom I love. Listen to him.

And so listening to God in his word gets the highest priority whenever we gather together. It is why preaching and proclamation gets mentioned in the book of Acts and in the episodes more than a hundred times.

It is why we here at KEC make one of our core convictions to be driven by God's word. So that the word is not just read and proclaimed but it is sung and prayed as well.

[13 : 03] After all, if God says we come to listen, that clearly assumes he will speak and so we make every effort to ensure he will be heard clearly.

Now, the trouble, of course, is that it can be hard to listen. So often we get caught up with doing things instead. notice in verse 1 that listening is contrasted with sacrificing.

Now, surely you might think sacrificing is a good thing. After all, isn't that the entire point of Old Testament religion? But just because there's a sacrifice doesn't necessarily mean it's automatically pleasing to God.

Notice here in verse 1 of Ecclesiastes chapter 5 back there that offering sacrifices is the equivalent of doing wrong.

And that's because these sacrifices were being offered without any thought. It was superficial. It carried no meaning to the one offering the sacrifice. It was a mere ritual carried out with no real awareness of God.

[14 : 25] And that, the teacher says, is the sacrifice of fools. They might be blind to that fact, but it doesn't change the fact that it's still wrong.

So, are you a fool? This morning, did you go through the motions of worship without ever engaging with what you were singing about?

When it was time to read the scriptures, did you keep your Bible closed and let your mind wander? In fact, is your Bible closed right now? Well, if the God of this universe wants to speak to you, but you're not paying attention, or you're playing with your phone instead, then the Bible says, without hesitation, that's foolish behavior.

Because your Savior wants to speak to you, but you're not bothered. But that's not the only way to be a fool. Fools can be passive, but they can be active as well.

They can lose themselves in lots and lots of religious activity, offering sacrifices all over the place. And so they can work themselves up trying to look impressive, making sure to lift up your hands at the right time, making sure to make that big donation to that particular ministry or the missions fund, making sure that our church attendance or even our serving looks nothing less than perfect on the outside.

[16 : 09] But because they're so preoccupied with that, they forget to actually do the one thing God wants them to do. Listen. How easy it is, isn't it, to just switch off at precisely the moment God wants you to switch on.

But the teacher says, if you do that, what you've done is to devote all your energy to the things that are hebal, while ignoring the one thing that isn't hebal.

You're rejecting one of God's good gifts, things alongside the gift of food and drink and satisfying work and good friendships. And that's the very gift of his word.

So don't be a fool. So how should we listen well? Sometimes it's simply a matter of expectation.

As you come to the house of God, you come expecting to hear from God. Do you come ready to listen to his voice?

[17 : 24] Is your heart open to any encouragement or correction which you might receive? If you come without any expectation, don't be surprised if you hear nothing.

And here's another thing. Do you come ready to obey? In the Bible, to listen often doesn't just mean that you hear some words that enter into your ear.

In the Bible, listening often means I hear with the intention to obey. And that's so often our problem, isn't it?

Not that we didn't hear, but that we didn't follow. And sometimes we excuse that by saying, God's word is too unrealistic, or it's too difficult, or it's too remote from us.

But one thing I've discovered is that God's word usually comes alive to us precisely when we actually begin to obey them. Sometimes we say, God is so distant from us, therefore I don't really feel like obeying him.

[18 : 41] But often we've got it the wrong way round. It's because we didn't really want to obey God, which is why he feels so distant from us.

And so listen attentively, dwell on what he's saying, perhaps use those coffee questions as a way to meditate on God's word, and then be willing to follow, and more often than not, you will taste and see that the Lord is good.

Secondly, speak carefully, speak carefully. The teacher now moves on to the subject of our tongues, and in verses 2 and 3, he basically makes the same point over and over again.

Don't be rash with your words, watch what you say. It's really the other side of the coin, isn't it? For if you are someone who doesn't come to the house of God to listen, you are usually someone who is quick with your mouth.

So don't be that person. Don't be too quick to speak, whether in speaking to God or speaking in the name of God.

[20 : 03] Why not? Because let's not forget whose presence we are in. Verse 2. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be filled.

In the opening pages of his autobiography, the early church father, Augustine, has this amazing paragraph in which he simply marvels at who God is. It's on your outline.

He writes, Who then are you, my God? Most high, utterly good, utterly powerful, most omnipotent, potent, most merciful and most just, deeply hidden yet most intimately present, perfection of both beauty and strength, stable and incomprehensible, immutable and yet changing all things, never new, never old, making everything new, always active, always in repose, gathering to yourself but not in need, supporting and feeling and protecting, creating and nurturing and bringing to maturity, searching, even though to you nothing is lacking, you love without burning and on and on he goes for another few sentences.

You see, when we gather together, we gather together in the presence of such a God who is not like any creature here on earth. He is unchanging in his character.

We keep changing our minds even in matters as simple as where to go for lunch. He never needs anything from anyone. We find ourselves looking for help all the time.

[21 : 52] He is most high, we are lowly. But you know what? Just as we listen when he speaks, so he listens as we speak.

He is most high and yet he is among us. He hears every single thing we say. And as Philip Riken says in his commentary on this passage, every time a mouth is open, a heart is on display.

And God knows, without fail, the heart behind our words. He knows when we are not praying, even when words come out of our mouth as we close our eyes.

He knows when we are not worshipping, even when musical notes emerge from our lips. He knows when we are not really looking to love and encourage others, but just giving out pious phrases while our mind wanders.

And so let your words be filled, the teacher says. Think before you speak. Use your words deliberately. After all, verse 3, a dream comes when there are many cares and many words mark the speech of a fool.

[23 : 24] The teacher quotes a proverb. And it's a little obscure, but the basic point he seems to be making is this. Just as those who work too hard to chase gain in this world often ends up with futile fantasies, so it is natural for fools to say too many words which are empty and futile in the end.

So the more you speak without thinking, the more likely you will say something foolish to God or to others. By contrast, Proverbs chapter 17 verse 27 says, the one who has knowledge uses words with restraint and whoever has understanding is even tempered.

So don't be a fool. do not do not speak. So how can we speak carefully? Well, let me offer you today two ways to do so which I hope reflects the teaching of the Bible as a whole.

There are more ways of course, but because of time, I only picked two. So number one, don't babble. In Matthew chapter 6 verse 7 to 8, Jesus tells us, and when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be hurt because of their many words.

Do not be like them, for your father knows what you need before you ask him. Notice what Jesus is pointing out. The pagan, he observes, say, plenty of words.

[25 : 08] They hope that by throwing in as many religious phrases as possible, they can manipulate God into giving what they want. But that's foolish, Jesus says.

Now, Jesus isn't condemning persistence in prayer, or even mere repetition. Rather, he is condemning empty words that are not designed to seek God sincerely, so much as to extract certain things from him.

Don't do that, God says. Don't just simply say, Amen, Hallelujah, Jesus, or throw in some other Christian-sounding words for the sake of it. And interestingly, straight after teaching us this, Jesus goes on in verse 9 to teach us the Lord's prayer.

Pray then in this way, Our Father in heaven. Like the teacher of Ecclesiastes, Jesus reminds us that God is in heaven, and we are on earth.

So let our words be filled. Let the prayer we say be meaningful. And the tendency to babble, I think, is not just restricted to prayer.

[26 : 37] I wonder if you've ever met people in church who just love to comment on everything. They must express their opinion on every single possible theological controversy.

They have already decided what God is like. They can't wait to tell you what that Bible passage must mean if they think it, they must say it.

Talking is what they love to do. But later on in Ecclesiastes 10, verse 14, the teacher will say that fools multiply words.

Elsewhere, Proverbs 18, verse 2, on the screen, reminds us that fools find no pleasure in understanding, but delight in airing their own opinions.

So let our words be filled, the teacher says. Don't babble. It's not so much about the number of words we say, but whether what we say brings true insight and edification.

[27 : 44] Number two, don't misrepresent. Now here the story of Job and his friends are particularly instructive for us.

Dr. Ong Meng Chai, whom some of you know, taught me this. Now, let me remind you very quickly what has happened in the book of Job. Satan has asked God for permission to test Job, and God agrees.

As a result, Job loses everything, possessions, family members, you name it. and as he grieves, his friends go and sit with him for an entire week, saying nothing.

Their words were certainly few at this point. But finally, they began speaking. And how they spoke? They were so sure that their theology was on point.

After all, were they not saying that God is just? Were they not saying that God punishes sin? And so, their conclusion is that if Job is suffering, he must have sinned.

[28 : 54] And God was punishing him, and they had no qualms about telling him that. They believed they were defending God. But what was God's verdict on these friends?

In Job 42, verse 7, he says to them, I'm angry with you, that's Eliphaz, one of the friends, and your two friends, because you have not spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has.

And then in verse 8, God continues, and my servant Job will pray for you, and I will accept his prayer and not deal with you according to your folly.

You have not spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has. Did you catch that? God is saying, all their profound theologizing in the end was nothing but the words of fools.

They are committing folly. They have misrepresented God. They did not speak carefully at all. And Job himself is not innocent either.

[30 : 08] earlier in Job 42 verse 3, he admits that he spoke of things he did not understand, and he has to repent. Verse 6.

So once again, speak carefully. Don't misrepresent. Don't try to sound clever, quote verses out of context, and end up showing that you haven't really listened as attentively to God's word as you should.

And as a preacher myself, who has to speak quite a few words, I find this especially sobering. Just this week, I learned of a story of a Canadian evangelist named R.E.

McAllister. In 1913, at a baptism service, he claimed that the apostles baptized in the name of Jesus only, and not in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

The next day, he clarified what he meant. He didn't mean that baptizing according to the Trinitarian formula was wrong, just that the apostles preferred to use the shorter formula.

[31 : 20] But the damage was done. As a result of his initial words, many took him to mean that the heresy known as modalism was okay, and it took root within his Pentecostal denomination.

Now, modalism is a heresy that holds that God is not really Trinity, but that he kind of switches modes between being God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. So, at one moment he's the Father, at another moment he's the Holy Spirit.

Now, although MacAllister subsequently traveled around his denomination in the next few years, trying to convince them to become fully Trinitarian, not everyone complied.

And so his careless words led to many churches adopting heresy. So, speak carefully. Guard your steps when you come to the house of God.

Thirdly, live without duplicity. Now, heaven told us to listen and to speak carefully. the teacher now reminds us to do what we say.

[32 : 36] Verse 4. When you make a vow to God, do not delay to fulfill it. He has no pleasure in fools. Fulfill your vow.

That's the basic point. You see, vows were a part and parcel of Old Testament worship. You'll find such language being used in some of the Psalms, for example.

They were not necessary, but if you made them, then you should keep them. That's exactly what Hannah did when she vowed to dedicate her firstborn son, Samuel, to the ministry of the priesthood.

And that's what Deuteronomy chapter 23 verse 21 to 23 says. It's on the screen. Okay. If you make a vow to the Lord your God, do not be slow to pay it, for the Lord your God will certainly demand it of you, and you will be guilty of sin.

But if you refrain from making a vow, you will not be guilty. Whatever your lips utter, you must be sure to do, because you made your vow freely to the Lord your God with your own mouth.

[33 : 47] That's the expectation. And though making vows is probably much more foreign to us today, the basic idea remains.

Do what we say. If you can't, then better not to make promises too quickly. But six, do not let your mouth lead you into sin.

Don't make grand promises. Don't say things just to impress without any intention of fulfilling them. That's what some people did. They pledged a big sum to the temple perhaps, or claimed to render some profound service for the Lord.

But as soon as a messenger from the temple comes and asks them about it, they say, no, no, no, you heard wrongly. My vow was a mistake.

And we can easily fall into the same trap, can't we? We can be so casual with God as we gather together.

[34 : 57] We can simply say, Lord, I will follow you all of my days. Lord, answer my prayer and I promise I will turn over a new leaf. But what happens when the next sign of difficulty comes?

Or when the thing that we hope God will give us doesn't come? Or conversely, what happens when life gets easy again after a period of difficulty when we were so desperate and we simply said things to God?

Well, we casually sweep those promises we made under the carpet. But hear what Jesus says in Matthew 12 36-37 But I tell you that everyone will give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken.

For by your words you will be acquitted and by your words you will be condemned. And that's why Jesus says it's better for your yes simply to be yes and your no simply to be no.

Better, in fact, to live without duplicity. Live such that when people look at you, what they see is what they get.

[36 : 21] Because God is in heaven and he sees and hears anyway. Don't play games with God. Be a man or woman of your word.

God will do. And if you do verse 6, then no reason for God to be angry at you or to punish you. That's what the teacher wants us to take away.

Now, I suppose it can sound a little bit like the teacher is advising us to play it safe. You know, oh, don't ever attempt radical obedience. Be like a typical Malaysian who never put up their hand for anything so that we don't have to take responsibility.

But I don't think that is really his point. He's asking us instead not to be overly reckless with our words, whether to God or to others, because the seven such words are hebel.

They are empty, fleeting, of no use. But when you do what you say, your words are not hebel any longer.

[37 : 35] They are backed up by your actions and indeed your lives. So guard our steps when we come to the house of God.

Listen attentively, speak carefully, live without duplicity. God is in heaven, you are on earth, so let your words be filled.

But as we finish, let's remember one more thing. Let's remember that the God who is in heaven did not stay in heaven. He came to earth too.

And every word Jesus spoke amazed the people. Who is this, they asked, who spoke with such authority? Who is this who speaks with such compassion?

No one spoke like Jesus because no one listened to God like him. And so his disciples could only come to one conclusion.

[38 : 44] Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, Peter says. we have come to believe and to know that you are the holy one of God.

And Jesus backed up his words. Three times he told his disciples that he must suffer, die, and rise again. And each time, no one really listened.

But Jesus never made rash vows. He said what he did, and he did what he said. He listened to God, fulfilled his mission, and brought us into God's household.

And in this household, we are given fresh words to speak. We can now say, as I mentioned already, not just that God is in heaven, but that our Father is in heaven.

And our Father knows what we need. And so we don't need to babble. We simply say, give us our daily bread. Our Father wants to give us every good thing, and so we don't have to manipulate.

[40 : 03] We simply say, your kingdom come, your will be done. And when we sin, we don't have to hide and pretend. We come to God because he's our Father.

and we simply say, forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors. In this household, we still must listen attentively, speak carefully, and live without duplicity.

But we can strive to do so with assurance and confidence because our steps are based not on the sacrifice of fools, but on the one who never did any wrong.

With that, let's pray for a worshipful heart. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, as we come together with your people, that as we come as living stones, with Jesus as the cornerstone, to be the household of God, Father, we pray that we will not come offering the sacrifice of fools.

Help us not to be quick with our mouths or hasty in our hearts, but to acknowledge that you are the one who is in heaven, and we are mere creatures here on earth.

[41 : 41] But we thank you that you saw it fit to bring us near to you, that we might enter into a relationship with you, that we can speak to you freely.

And so we pray, Lord, that we'll make the most of that privilege without ever taking it for granted, without ever abusing it, and help us to listen well to you and to others, so that we might live the way you want us to, full of integrity, without duplicity.

All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.