

Explore the Bible: Why listen?

July 19, 2021

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for Aug. 8 focuses on Ecclesiastes 4:13-5:7.*

“You have two ears and one mouth. Therefore, you should listen twice as much as you talk.” I have heard this advice most of my life. Most everyone enjoys a good conversation, and our favorite topic is usually ourselves. Qohelet gives us sound advice as part of our text this week, Ecclesiastes 5:1-2, to “guard your steps when you go to the house of God. ...do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. ...let your words be few.”

Prepare for worship

What is life like for you on a Sunday morning? The verses in chapter 5 give direction to those who would be going up to the Temple for worship. At the Temple, God took up residence in ancient Israel, where the sacrifice for sins took place, and it was there God’s word would be proclaimed. While there is no way of knowing what great priest Oohelet has in mind to whom the worshipper should give full attention, it is worth noting the wise approach worship with the respect, devotion and reverence that is deserved.

In what ways might we prepare ourselves better for Sundays? Do we approach each worship service with the reverence and awe that is required? Or do we judge other worshippers, the music selection, and our own choices that cause us to be tired and removed from the opportunity to join other corporately before God’s throne. Don’t be a fool in church!

How to pray

Qohelet also gives advice on our prayer life. Remember that old saying, “There are no atheists in foxholes?” Everyone prays. But, as Qohelet puts it, “Much dreaming and many words are meaningless” (v. 5:7). Those who pray this way get nothing from God and nothing really from men either.

Like Qohelet, Jesus offers practical teaching on approaching God in prayer in his Sermon on the Mount, starting in Matthew 6:5-13, “whenever you pray... .” The religiously observant Jews would pray at precise times each day. They would recite the *shema* from Deut. 6:4-5. It didn’t matter where they were, even if they were in the streets, they would stop, face the Temple and pray. The posture of prayer was to stand and raise hands towards heaven. Qohelet and Jesus both are more concerned with the posture of the heart than the posture of the physical body.

There was nothing wrong with praying in the synagogues. It was just what the Pharisees were putting out there was for man and their own advantage. Pagan babbling was to prove they had figured out the equation to activate this certain god. Our God isn’t that way because he is the one true God. He cannot be “manipulated” by formula. God’s name was revealed by himself. Prayer begins and ends with God.

Praying where the Spirit resides and intercedes

The pagan reward, according to Jesus? Nothing. But for those who pray out of sincerity, closing the door, praying in the closet (or literal “inner room or pantry”), these are the ones who have a heart prepared for God to speak and are listening for his voice. They are the ones who do not make idle vows, but rather keep a posture of fear and reverence.

We take as our example now Hannah (1 Samuel 1:13-17), Daniel (Daniel 6:10), and Cornelius (Acts 10:1-4), who were sincere and focused in their prayer to God. And their reward? The reward was a more intimate relationship with almighty God. A better knowledge of God's will. A better understanding of who God is and who God has called us to be. Their prayer is coming from the inner space in their lives where the Spirit resides and intercedes on their behalf.

Modern-day theologian N.T. Wright reminds us of Paul's teaching in Romans 8:26-27, "At the very moment when we are struggling to pray, and have no idea even what to pray for, just at that point the Spirit is most obviously at work. We are often quick with our words and I wonder if we drown out the Spirit's groaning." As we pray this week, let us remember we have two ears and one mouth. Yes, God wants to hear from us; however, he desires to speak to us and through us, as well.

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