

1. Fear God

The Preacher teaches us that under the sun, on this cursed world, everything is vanity, and there is no profit in all the toil done under the sun. Therefore, in this reality of *hebel*, he exhorts us not to live according to the wisdom of foolish men, but to hold fast to the wisdom of God, and thus he leads us to the wisdom of God.

What, then, is the vain reality of *hebel* under the sun that is revealed in today's passage? It is the life of vain worship that foolish people offer according to human wisdom. In this passage, the Preacher gives two commands concerning true worship to God in verse 1 and verse 7—the beginning and the end of the text—and in verses 2–6 between them, he shows four aspects of the empty worship that fallen sinners offer. First, in verse 1 he says, “*Guard your steps when you go to the house of God,*” and in verse 7 he says, “*But God is the one you must fear.*” These words show us the wisdom of God that we must hold fast to and the life of worship that pleases Him.

However, in verses 2–6, the Preacher shows four forms of vain worship offered according to human wisdom rather than God's wisdom: **speaking rashly before God, speaking with a hasty heart, multiplying words, and making vows without fulfilling them.** This, he says, is the vain worship of foolish people under the sun. Do you notice what these all have in common? They all relate to **speech**. Through these words, Scripture reveals the empty worship of sinful people. Last Lord's Day we examined worship offered with vain words. Today we will look at verses 4–6, focusing on worship offered through **vain vows before God**. These vows also are connected with speech.

Ecclesiastes 5:4–6, “*When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow. It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. Let not your mouth lead you into sin, and do not say before the messenger that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry at your voice and destroy the work of your hands?*”

We are told not to delay in paying what we have vowed to God, and that it is better not to vow at all than to vow and not fulfill it. In the Old Testament law, there are instructions concerning worship through oaths and vows. Yet the people of Israel, because of their sinful nature, worshiped God with **vain oaths and vain vows**. In particular, they would seek God's blessings and, in return, promise to do something for God—making vows and oaths as a form of worship.

There is already a problem here. But even beyond that, even when God granted them blessings, they did not keep what they had vowed with thanksgiving. Furthermore, instead of swearing or making vows in the name of God, as verse 6 indicates, they sometimes swore by angels or by other things.

These vain oaths and vows are also a typical form of idolatrous worship—worship that is filled with many words rather than listening to God. Through this, it is revealed that when they entered the house of God, they did not guard their steps and did not fear Him. Rather than knowing God, having a right relationship and fellowship with Him, listening to His word, and obeying Him, they sought to

use God for their own glory and benefit—even attempting to **make transactions with God** through vows and oaths.

This, the Preacher tells us, is the typical pattern of vain worship among foolish sinners under the sun. It is the sin that flows from continuing to sit in the place of God, believing that God must serve them. Our Lord Jesus also spoke about such vain oaths and vows.

2. Vain Oaths

Matthew 5:33–37, *“Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.’ But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.”*

Originally, an oath refers to strongly affirming or guaranteeing that something is true, and a vow is a promise to do something. Both were elements of godly worship that were to be made **before God, with God as witness**. Therefore, the Old Testament law commands that one must not make false vows or oaths, and if one makes a vow or oath, it must surely be kept. For false vows or oaths would amount to offering false worship before God.

But what does Jesus say? He says, **“Do not take an oath at all,”** and not to swear by anything other than God, but rather to speak only the truth. This does not mean that the Old Testament law was wrong. Nor does it mean that oaths and vows themselves are wrong. Rather, Jesus is rebuking the **vain worship of sinners expressed through false oaths and vows**. As we have said, there are many commands in Scripture concerning oaths and vows.

Leviticus 19:12, *“You shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God: I am the LORD.”*

Deuteronomy 23:21–23, *“If you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not delay fulfilling it, for the LORD your God will surely require it of you, and you will be guilty of sin. But if you refrain from vowing, you will not be guilty of sin. You shall be careful to do what has passed your lips, for you have voluntarily vowed to the LORD your God what you have promised with your mouth.”*

From these passages, it is clear that oaths and vows are part of God’s good law. Then why does Jesus say, “Do not take an oath at all”? At first glance, it may sound as though all oaths and vows are now evil and wrong, but that is not what He is saying. Rather, Jesus teaches that **our entire life is to be lived before God as a life of oath and vow**, with God as our witness. This is the true meaning that the law was pointing to.

But because sinners do not live all of life before God in this way, God gave specific laws concerning oaths and vows to expose their sin. If sin had not entered the world, there would have been no need for such laws. Without oaths or vows, all people would have spoken only truth before God and devoted their entire lives to His good pleasure. However, because sin entered, and because those

who live under the sun are filled with falsehood in their hearts, even their worship to God has become filled with **vain oaths and vows**.

Here is something we must consider: all the commands of the law are first true of God Himself, and therefore required of His people. **God Himself makes oaths and vows**. In fact, all of God's word can be understood as His oath and His vow, and He faithfully fulfills all of it.

Hebrews 6:13–18, *“For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, saying, ‘Surely I will bless you and multiply you.’ And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise. For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation. So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath,*

so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us.”

God is truth itself, and because there is no one greater than Himself, He swears by Himself. That is, God Himself becomes the witness and faithfully fulfills what He has sworn and promised. Why can we trust all the promises that God has sworn and vowed? Because **God does not change and cannot lie**. He is truth itself. Where are all of God's oaths and vows revealed? They are revealed in **His Word given to His people**. Therefore, all of God's Word is His true oath and vow, and God upholds and fulfills them with His whole being.

Thus, oaths and vows are not wrong in themselves. Rather, they were **a sign of the covenant relationship between God and His people**. God makes oaths and keeps them faithfully, and His people also are to make oaths and keep them faithfully. Just as God makes His oaths before Himself, with Himself as witness, and in His own name, so also all our oaths and vows must be made **before God, with God as witness, and in the name of God**. This does not mean that we must frequently mention God's name when making oaths or vows, but rather that this is the reality of all our lives. For our entire lives are lived before God, with God as witness, bearing His name.

Especially for the people of God, this is even more so, because God has placed His name upon them and made them a people called by His name. In this sense, whatever we vow or swear must surely be kept—not only when we explicitly invoke the name of God, but even when we do not. For even if we do not mention His name, all our vows and oaths are still made before God, since our entire lives testify to His name.

Yet the people of Israel distorted this law of God and taught that if one did not swear explicitly in God's name, then it was acceptable not to keep it. As verse 6 of today's passage indicates, they would say that a vow made before a messenger (or angel) was a mistake and did not need to be kept, calling such vows insignificant. In this way, Scripture shows that their worship before God had become corrupted—even through false oaths and vows. Our Lord Jesus also spoke about this:

Matthew 23:16–22, *“Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.’ You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? And you say, ‘If anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath.’ You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. And whoever swears by the temple*

swears by it and by him who dwells in it. And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it.”

As we know well, the Jews in Jesus’ time created many detailed regulations in an effort to keep God’s law more precisely. They did the same with oaths. Here, oaths can also be understood as vows. But there was a problem with their distinctions. They taught that if one swore by the altar or the temple, it did not need to be kept, but if one swore by the gift on the altar or the gold of the temple, then it must be kept. They arbitrarily divided which oaths were before God and which were not.

Are we not the same? To strengthen our claims and prove that our words are not vain, do we not invoke stronger witnesses—even calling upon someone like our mother or another authority? But Jesus teaches that **all our oaths and vows are made before God**. Therefore, we must not swear by anything other than God, nor think that such oaths do not need to be kept. All must be kept.

Matthew 5:34–37, *“But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.”*

The reason Jesus says not to swear by heaven, or earth, or Jerusalem, or anything else, is because **all these things belong to God**, and therefore any oath made by them is ultimately an oath made before God. Thus, to swear and vow in the name of God and to keep it is true worship offered to Him. Yet the reason people avoid swearing in God’s name and instead swear by other things is because their hearts are full of falsehood. It comes from a vain desire not to keep their oaths and from a sinful refusal to acknowledge God.

Heaven is God’s throne, the earth is His footstool, Jerusalem is His city, and even the hairs of our head are all numbered and made white or black by Him. In other words, **our entire lives are lived before God**. Therefore, all our lives are lives of oaths and vows before Him. This is what we must acknowledge. To refuse to acknowledge this is the empty worship of fools.

Therefore, Jesus says, **“Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No.’”** Anything beyond this comes from evil. This means that we are to live our entire lives before God, speaking only the truth. As we will see, this becomes even more so after the coming of Christ. Yet throughout redemptive history, we continually see this pattern of vain worship.

3. Vain Worship

First, if we look at the book of Judges, whenever Israel abandoned God and turned away from Him because of their sin and disobedience, God gave them into the hand of their enemies. At those times, the people would cry out to God, vowing and promising that they would return to Him and obey Him. And each time, God raised up judges to deliver them from the hands of their enemies, and for a while, during the life of the judge, there was peace.

But did that peace last long? It did not. The people of Israel did not keep the vows and promises they had made. They quickly turned away from God again, and once more God had to give them into the hands of their enemies. This vicious cycle continued throughout the period of the judges. And there

is a phrase that clearly describes the sinful condition of that time: “*Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.*” In other words, they did not listen to the word of God, nor did they have any desire to obey. They worshiped God with many words according to their own judgment, seeking their own glory and benefit. Then, when they encountered hardship, they were quick to cry out and to make vows and promises. But afterward, they did not keep what they had vowed.

Though it appeared that they were worshiping God, in reality they were **making transactions with God** through their words and vows. This is a typical form of idolatry, and it is what has always appeared whenever the church becomes corrupt. And is not this same sinful nature within us? Do we not see the same cycle of the period of the judges in our own lives? When we abandon God and live apart from Him, and then face hardship, we seek God and even try to use Him, making bargains with Him. At such times, our faith is filled with many words.

Do we not say, “If You just bring me through this season... if You just help me overcome this crisis... if You just solve this problem, then I will turn back, devote myself, and live for You”? In our daily lives, there is little listening and obedience, but when trouble comes, we become full of words and make conditional bargains, even using God, offering foolish and vain worship through vows. And if God grants what we ask, resolving our crisis, we may seem thankful for a moment, but like Israel in the time of the judges, we quickly return to our former life and once again abandon God. On the other hand, if nothing is resolved, we complain and grumble, saying that God has not listened to us or obeyed us, and we begin to doubt God’s wisdom and turn even further away from Him.

Of course, the lives of believers who have been given faith are different in that God uses all these processes to lead them in sanctification. Nevertheless, this is the nature of sinners. Thus, regardless of the outcome, the vows of foolish sinners ultimately lead to the same end: living apart from God, because they do not listen or obey. Therefore, the Preacher says that it is better not to vow at all.

Accordingly, the four forms of vain worship described in today’s passage— **speaking rashly before God, speaking with a hasty heart, multiplying words, and making vows without fulfilling them**—are all connected. These together reveal the vain worship of foolish people under the sun. Then what is the Preacher teaching us through all these examples of empty worship? Remember what we considered last time. Is he giving us wisdom so that we might live better lives of worship? Is he telling us to keep our vows more faithfully or to avoid making vain vows so that we can worship God better? Verse 2 says, “*God is in heaven and you are on earth.*” Does this mean that if we do well enough, we who are on earth can reach the God who is in heaven and worship Him? **Not at all.**

The Preacher is showing us that this is what the worship of foolish people under the sun is like. This is the reality of *hebel* under the sun. He is calling us to acknowledge it. Even in worship, those who live under the sun are filled with the falsehood and foolishness of sin. They do not listen to God but speak many words, trying to use God—even making vows and oaths as a way of bargaining with Him.

Thus, though it appears that they are worshiping God, in reality they are worshiping themselves. God becomes merely a means for their worldly glory and benefit—a supporter for their life projects, even an idol to be used and negotiated with. For their own advantage, when needed, they speak many words and make vows, temporarily placing God on the throne, but this is a subtle deception. In truth, they themselves remain on the throne, living as though even God must serve them.

Did not the sinners treat Jesus in the same way? When they thought He would give them bread, they exalted Him as king, but in the end they crucified Him. This is the vain worship of foolish sinners under the sun. We see the same in the life of Peter. During Jesus' earthly ministry, Peter did not listen to the gospel of the cross that Jesus proclaimed. Instead, he was quick to speak, spoke many words, and even made vain vows and oaths, claiming to serve Jesus.

Matthew 26:35, *"Peter said to him, 'Though I must die with you, I will not deny you!' And all the disciples said the same."*

This was Peter's vow. He declared that he would never deny Jesus, even to death. The other disciples said the same. But what happened afterward? It was revealed that his vow was vain and his worship was vain. When was this revealed? When Jesus went to the cross, Peter denied Him three times, even with curses.

It became clear that the object of his worship was himself, not Jesus. For his own worldly benefit and security, he had made vows before Jesus, attempting to use Him and make a bargain with Him. Of course, Peter was a citizen of heaven whom Jesus had saved. Yet even in him there remained the sinful nature of idolatry. His empty vows and worship were like a house built on sand, destined to collapse. And we are no different.

Yet Jesus loved Peter and had mercy on him. He kept Peter's faith from failing, restored his life entirely by grace, led him to repentance and faith, and transformed him into a wise worshiper who listens and obeys. Here is Peter's hope: **the grace of Jesus alone**. To hold fast to that grace is the wisdom of God. Therefore, remember again the picture of the true worshiper given in today's passage:

Ecclesiastes 5:1a, 2b, 7b, *"Guard your steps when you go to the house of God... God is in heaven and you are on earth... But God is the one you must fear."*

Beloved, this word is like a verdict from God upon us sinners who live under *hebel*. It is not saying, "Do better and you will live," nor is it saying that by doing these things we who are on earth can reach the God in heaven and worship Him. Rather, it declares that **we cannot do this**. Among all who live under the sun, there is no one who can truly guard his steps, fear God, and reach heaven to worship Him. We have no hope. Therefore, we must look at ourselves and cry out, **"Vanity of vanities!"** And with our despair, we must come before God.

Among sinners living under the sun, who can perfectly keep and fulfill all the vows they have made, guard their steps, fear God, and reach heaven to worship Him? No one can. Can the distance between the holy God in heaven and us sinners living under the curse on earth—objects of His wrath—be bridged by our words, our zeal, our devotion, or even our vows and oaths? To believe this is great pride. Sinners cannot do this. To think that we can is like building the Tower of Babel in order to reach heaven—a sin that God must judge and destroy. Yet this is how those living under *hebel* attempt to worship God—building their own towers to heaven. Then what is the ultimate wisdom by which God leads such hopeless sinners?

4. The Worship of Jesus

God, in His mercy toward such foolish sinners, causes us to look to the One whom He has sent—**our Savior, our High Priest, our Mediator**—who, in our place and on our behalf, perfectly feared God and worshiped Him. He leads us to come with our despair and to hold fast to Him as our only hope.

Instead of speaking rashly or speaking many words, instead of making vain oaths and vows, there is One who offered His entire life before God, with God as witness, for the glory of God's name, fully devoted to God's good pleasure in worship. That One is our Lord **Jesus Christ**, who, being God, became man like us.

Jesus did not make separate oaths or vows; rather, **His entire life was a life of oath and vow before God**, wholly offered for the glory of God's name. Through His obedience—even to the shedding of His blood and His death—we have received the forgiveness of all our sins and have been justified. We have become the holy sons of God, able to enter heaven and come before the God who sits upon the heavenly throne.

And in Christ, we too, like Him, are received as those who have worshiped God with our entire lives as a perfect oath and vow. Thus, the infinite distance between the holy God in heaven and us sinners living on this cursed earth under the sun has been bridged **only by the perfect life of oath and vow of Jesus Christ**. Therefore, holding fast to Jesus alone, we now guard our steps and boldly come before the holy throne of God in heaven, worshiping Him in the fear of the Lord.

Now, since in Jesus Christ we have already become the beloved sons of God and have come to worship before His heavenly throne, we are called to hold fast to this grace, to step down from the place of God, and to turn away from all forms of idolatrous living—where we once tried to use God, bargain with Him through words and vows, and control Him. Instead, with thanksgiving for all the grace and love of salvation that has been given to us, we are to confess our faith, bear witness to our love, and offer our whole lives as living sacrifices pleasing to God, worshiping Him in the fear of the Lord. Therefore, the book of James says:

James 5:12, *“But above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your ‘yes’ be yes and your ‘no’ be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation.”*

How, then, should we understand this word? Though it resembles today's passage, it contains the reality of the gospel of the kingdom that Christ has accomplished. Because Jesus has come and accomplished all salvation, we have been delivered from the life under the sun and transferred into the life that belongs to heaven. In heaven, there is no need for separate oaths or vows. In heaven, like Jesus, we will live our entire lives before God, hallowing His name and bearing witness only to the truth.

That heavenly life has already begun. Therefore, we are told not to make separate oaths or vows, but to live bearing witness only to the truth—living with thanksgiving for the grace of salvation we have received, confessing our faith and bearing witness to our love in all our lives. Especially for the saints who have been delivered from under the sun and now belong to heaven, we have been made to live bearing witness to the truth. And who is this truth? It is **Jesus Christ**.

John 14:6, *“Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’”*

Jesus is the truth. Therefore, to live bearing witness to the truth—to live a life of true oath and vow—is to live our entire lives bearing witness to Jesus. Because we have been saved by the blood and righteousness of Jesus, united with Him, and born again into His likeness, we now know Him, believe in Him, love Him, delight in Him, and live lives that resemble Him. Before God, in all that we do—whether in word or deed—we do everything in the name of Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him. To live as **witnesses of Jesus, the fragrance of Jesus, and the letter of Jesus**—this is the worship of oath and vow that belongs to the people of the kingdom of heaven. In all our lives—in our words, our thoughts, and our actions—Jesus is present, and Jesus is made known. Therefore, our oaths and vows now are **confessions of thanksgiving** for the grace and love of salvation we have received.

Of course, there are times when we publicly make oaths and vows before God in His name during worship: when we make a confession of faith, when we are baptized, when we take membership vows, or when we take vows for church office. All these are oaths and vows made publicly before God in His name. Yet even these vows are our confessions of faith, offered with thanksgiving for the grace we have received, holding fast to that grace, and relying on it. Therefore, we must continually remember and reflect upon the confessions we have made—our profession of faith, our membership vows, our vows of officers, and even the vows we made when our children were baptized. And we must earnestly pray for God's grace so that we may live lives worthy of those vows.

Peter once made a vow before God, declaring that he would never deny Jesus, even to death. Yet later, his vow collapsed, and it was revealed that his worship had been empty. But after His resurrection, Jesus came to Peter and restored him. Jesus asked him three times, **“Do you love me?”** Was Jesus demanding another oath or vow from Peter? No. He was leading Peter to make a confession of faith, relying on His grace. Bound by the love of Christ and holding fast to His grace, Peter confessed that he loved Jesus. And Jesus preserved that confession to the end, so that Peter would ultimately live a life of perfectly loving Jesus in the kingdom of heaven. This is what our worship of oaths and vows now looks like. We live confessing our faith and love to Jesus, relying on His grace, giving thanks for His love, and hoping that He will keep us in the faith until the day we fully love Him in heaven.

The same is true of our worship. Every element of worship is a time of making oaths and vows to God with thanksgiving. When we sing hymns, we are not merely singing songs; we are confessing our faith, making vows in the name of God. When we pray, we are not merely speaking words; we are, with thanksgiving, seeking God's will to be done and making vows and confessions, holding fast to the grace of Christ. Likewise, the membership vows we made, the vows of office, and the vows we made when presenting our children for baptism—all of these are confessions of faith, offered with thanksgiving for God's grace, and with a prayer that by His grace we may live in faithfulness to what we have vowed.

Therefore, may it be that everything—our words, our vows, and indeed our entire lives—flows from faith in the gospel and from knowing Jesus Christ. So that even while we live under the sun, spiritually we have come to heaven, and because of Jesus, we guard our steps and live as those who worship God before His throne with thanksgiving. Let us conclude with the passage we considered last Lord's Day:

Colossians 3:16–17, *“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your*

hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."