

Relating Wisely to God

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[0 : 0 0] Thanks very much, Ross. And do keep that chapter open in front of you if you have it there, Ecclesiastes chapter 5 and those first seven verses. I saw an advert last week which began by saying, what is the recipe for the good life? I don't know if anyone else has seen this advert.

It got my attention straight away because in some ways that's what we have been looking at. That is the big question in the book of Ecclesiastes. What is the good life? How do we live life well? What is it all about?

So in this advert said, what is the recipe for a good life? I was kind of tuned straight in. I was eager to hear the world's answer to that question. And it turned out it was an advert for fish fingers. So apparently that's the key to the good life.

I like to think as we've been looking through the book of Ecclesiastes so far, as we've been looking at the words of the preacher that we're told wrote the words of this book, that we've been able to dig in a little bit deeper. We've been able to think of things slightly more profound than that.

As it's explored that the world that we live in and how to make sense of that. Last week we saw how important relating rightly to other people was if we're to live as God designed us to.

[1 : 2 4] And we saw how it's only the gospel of Jesus Christ that enables us to truly live in partnership with others rather than in opposition to others. So last week the focus was on people and how we relate to them.

This week the focus is on God himself and how we are to relate to him. God has been present throughout Ecclesiastes so far. The fact that we live in God's world, we receive from God's hand, we rejoice in God's goodness.

God is essential to the preacher's understanding of the world we live in. But here in chapter 5 we might say rather than seeing other parts of life in light of God, here it is God himself and how we are to relate to him that is very much the prime focus.

And there can be no bigger question then for us to think about and deal with this morning, can there? How are we to come to the God of all creation?

What is our posture to be before the God of heaven? These are huge questions for all of us this morning, whether we would call ourselves Christians or whether we're still exploring what that might mean and what that might look like.

[2 : 4 5] We're going to see that if we need God to make sense of our world, which the book of Ecclesiastes has been clear that we do, if we need God to make sense of our world, then that requires God to not just be a kind of a character in the background or part of the scenery, but actually the primary input and focus in our lives.

And that shapes then as well how we live in response to that. So there's two halves we're going to see in this section. The first one is this, the priority of listening to God's word.

How are we to relate well to God? The first thing that we see, the priority of listening to God's word. And the immediate context here, as we'll see, is in gathering to worship God.

It's really in coming together as we do this morning, but also in overflowing from that into every area of life, the priority of listening to God's word.

As we do have a look down at verse one, we read this, God, your steps, when you go to the house of God, to draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they are doing evil.

[4 : 00] The picture here is of the Old Testament worshiper, the Old Testament, remember that part of the Bible before Jesus, the Old Testament worshiper who comes to worship God. They come to the temple, this incredible building designed to reflect the greatness, the grandness of God.

They bring their sacrifice, as it says, this kind of visceral, this visual action designed to demonstrate God's holiness, his purity, his separation from sin.

They go through all of these rituals. And yet we read that all this worshiper's doing is in vain. That it is a fool's sacrifice.

What is supposed to be good, we're told, is actually doing evil. Why? Well, because it is done with no connection to who God actually is.

And so there's lots of noise and religious activity, but there is no recognition of their place in respect to God.

[5 : 05] Why not? What's the sign of that? Well, because they haven't come to listen to him. And verse 2 shows really how foolish that is. God is in heaven and you are on earth, the preacher says.

The kind of implicit question is, well, whose voice do you think it's most important to hear? Is it God's voice, the one who is the creator of all things, the one who knows all things, the one who is above all things?

Or is it your voice? And just in case we miss the kind of rhetorical nature of that question, we're given the answer as well. Therefore, let your words be few.

The wise approach then to come in before God, the approach that goes with the grain of reality, which is really what wisdom is in the book of Ecclesiastes.

The wise approach is to be quiet and is to put our thoughts, our ideas, our agendas to one side and rather to listen to what God, the creator, what God who is in heaven is saying to us.

[6 : 10] And then verse 3 ties this section together. It says, just as busyness or overwork, that could be translated as, leaves us prone to dream of what might be, to imagine a different reality.

So it says, many words, lots of talk, the constant desire to prioritize our words over God's words reveals not wisdom or intellect, but actually means that we are hearing or we are speaking as a fool, as a fool, a fool's voice, refusing to recognize reality.

And so for us then, in a world that is so full of noise and opinion, in a world where we're told it's so important that we are heard, that we speak our truth, in a world where social media or other ways that we're connected with people encourage us to immediately express our views on whatever the latest issue might be, we come to this book of Ecclesiastes and we see that actually wisdom when we come before God means not falling into this pattern of quick speaking, but wisdom means the priority of listening to God's word rather than always seeking to make ourselves heard.

And as we start to apply this, I think we see as it has been the case throughout Ecclesiastes, again, just how relevant this is to us, how it helps us as we consider that central aspect of our life, as we said, how do we relate to God, our creator?

And really the primary, the most direct application is precisely what we're doing this morning, isn't it? What does it look like to gather in the worship of God? That's the kind of initial setting in Ecclesiastes.

[8 : 00] How do we organize ourselves and prioritize things as a church in light of what Ecclesiastes tells us? And very simply, the takeaway for us this morning is this, that we ensure the priority of listening to God's word in our time together.

And that simply is what we're doing now. We are gathering around God's word, the Bible. That really is the central part of our church and of our service because it is God's word to us.

And we want to hear more than anything else what it is that God has to say. He is in heaven. We are on earth. And we want to recognize the immense privilege that God speaks his wisdom to us, that God has spoken to help us make sense of our world, that God continues to speak through his word.

And so as we sit, week by week by week, we want to make sure that this doesn't become kind of routine or just something we kind of tick off, but that we listen carefully.

That's a good reminder for me as well. My job is not to try and bring kind of clever things from the Bible that aren't really there or to use it as a springboard to share my viewpoint on various different matters or different hobby horses that I have.

[9 : 22] No, my job is to simply try and point us to what God is saying so that God sets the agenda. What this church needs most of all is not my opinion or my ideas or anyone else's.

We need God's word and to listen to that as a priority. So often the danger when people say they're kind of imagining new ways of doing church or trying new things, it's the preaching that gets kind of pushed out or marginalized.

It's either replaced by discussion or it's kind of relegated beneath the singing or it's just kind of squeezed in kind of apologetically somewhere. There's any number of ways that even as we gather, God's word can be sidelined.

And because it is for all of us, it's unusual for us to sit in this kind of context and to listen. And yet this passage again is reminding us, is telling us that is the most important thing we can do as we gather because we are able to listen to the very words of God.

That means as well as people move on from church here in Harrington, whether that's people moving house or just had a couple of young guys move on to uni, our kind of advice to them, the point is not to try and find a church that looks exactly the same and does everything exactly the same as this one.

[10 : 40] There will be various ways of doing things. Plenty of churches will do plenty of things far better than we do. But we would say that the key is to find a church where listening to God's word is at the very heart and the priority of their time together.

And making sure that as a church here, we maintain that commitment to listen. So that's perhaps the most direct application from this passage in that in gathered worship, we gather near to listen to God through his word, the Bible.

But what about the rest of our lives? How do we relate to God Monday to Saturday? What does this passage have to say in that regard, living whole lives of worship? Well, again, I think the takeaway is the same.

Listening to God through his word has to take the primary position in that. If we want to grow in living for God's glory, if we really want to truly understand who God is, we have to prioritize time in his word.

I think on this, there's various books along similar lines. And I think most of them are written with really good intentions that speak all about the different ways that people, different people connect with God.

[11 : 55] And I think they can be helpful in that they take seriously that God has made us different as people, different temperaments, different preferences. But I think the danger in a number of them, and I've read a couple, is that the Bible and God speaking to us through his word and gathering as his people to listen to his word just becomes kind of one option among many other things that you might choose in terms of how you relate to God.

It becomes a certain way to relate to God for a certain type of person. But actually, if you'd rather be out kind of enjoying the sunrise or out serving in the community, then those are kind of equally valid to listening to God's word, the Bible.

And yet I do think when we look at passages like this, and there's other places we could turn in the Bible as well, that actually can't be the right approach, can it? There is this priority of listening to God's word above all other things, above all the other ways that we honour God and enjoy him.

But listening to God first is what enables us to worship him in these other ways, to serve him in these other areas of life. But we only get that right, though, as we first listen to what God speaks to us, as we keep his word, the Bible, at the very heart of our relationship with and worship of him as individuals as well as a church.

The priority of listening to God's word is for all of us, all the time. One final application of that before we move on then, and that is in terms of helping other people.

[13 : 35] So when people we know are suffering, when people we know are struggling, when people we know are going through hard times, what do we think is the thing that they need the most?

It's not our quick answers, is it? It's not us trying to solve any problems that they have. It took me about 11 years of being married to learn that. I'm sure other people got there faster than I did.

But we're often too quick to kind of give our advice and our thoughts in a situation, aren't we? We need to learn often to step back from that. And yet also to remember from this passage that as God's people, we want to remember that we don't have nothing to say or nothing to speak into these hard times.

Because we are able to point to God's word. And that is what people need most of all. We need to do that wisely. It's not a quick fix or an easy answer. There's not just a magic verse we can drop in that is going to solve everyone's problems.

But actually we know that in God's word, he reveals to us his love for those who are struggling. He shows us that love in Jesus. He makes promises of his presence with us.

[14 : 49] As we saw a couple of weeks ago, he reminds us of his control over all the seasons of life. That he is making everything beautiful in its time, even when we can't possibly see how that can be working out in the present.

He reminds us of the eternal home and joy he is preparing for all those who put their trust in Jesus. Again, when we listen to God's word, when we prioritize that in our lives, we find we have incredible words to be able to encourage others to listen to and point others to as well.

So we need to listen to God's word and point others to as well. Because God is the creator who made our universe. He is the one who is in heaven.

So he is the only one who can help us really understand it. And also because God is the redeemer who through Jesus, the word become flesh. Has the words that offer forgiveness.

Words that offer reconciliation. Words that offer hope. There is a great part in John's gospel where Jesus says to his disciples, Do you want to go away as well?

[16 : 03] Do they also want to leave him? Because it is difficult sometimes following Jesus. But Peter responds, Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.

And it is God's word through Christ in the Bible given to us. That are the words of life that we want to prioritize listening to. And so let's not duck the directness of Ecclesiastes teaching.

Remember, we saw right at the beginning, it says these words are like goads. They're like sharp, kind of pointy things. To listen to God is a command. We don't want to try and blunt these words.

But we want to remember as well, it's also the greatest privilege there is. As God's word to us reveals the gospel of Jesus. The only hope for eternal life.

That Jesus has suffered on the cross for our sins. For the things that we have done wrong. That through him we can be forgiven. And rightly relate to God, our creator.

[17 : 04] And have that hope that life with him brings. So again, whether you're a Christian or not, this morning there is nothing better than to prioritize listening to God's word.

Gathering to hear it as God's people. Speaking it with others. Opening the Bible at home. Asking questions where we don't understand it. But listening because it is God's word which gives wisdom.

And points us to Jesus where eternal hope is found. So, first half of this passage then. The priority of listening to God's word.

And we want to remember the privilege of that as well. In a world that kind of beams in so many voices for us to listen to. We have the voice of our creator. We want to remember the privilege of listening to that.

Second half then of the passage from verse 4 onwards. Is the importance of integrity from God's people. So, the priority of listening to God's word. The importance of integrity from God's people.

[18 : 06] And these two halves are really closely linked together. Because it's as we listen. As we hear God's word. That we're called then to respond. And that response should be consistent.

Committed. And have integrity. And so, the focus in these verses moves from how we listen. To how we speak. It moves from God's words. To our words.

And particularly this idea of vows. So, do have a look at verse 4. And onwards it says this. 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 you should not pay. Let not your mouth lead you into sin. And do not say before the messenger. That it was a mistake.

So, again. We're in the Old Testament times here. In the Old Testament. People could make a specific vow. At the temple. Of what they would do for. Or what they would give to God.

[19 : 05] That was kind of over and above. What was required. And yet the picture here. Isn't it? Of someone who comes to worship. They make all these grand vows. These great promises.

Of what they're going to give. All the different ways they're going to serve God. The different commitments that they make to him. But then actually the cost of that. Or the reality of that.

Starts to sink in. Maybe it's a couple of days later. Or the next week. And suddenly they're trying to back out. Aren't they? They're trying to tell the temple messenger. That they didn't really mean it.

It was a mistake. They didn't mean to say what I said. And so they don't need to follow through with it. That's the Old Testament context. It's pretty easy, isn't it? For us to draw that line to ourselves.

God, if you'll just help me in this situation. Then I'll never do that again. Or I'll do this. Or I'll start doing that. Or the other thing. And yet, when the cost of that kicks in.

[20 : 05] Suddenly we're not quite so enthusiastic. Or when God does his bit. Suddenly we're not quite as keen. Or committed to go through with what we'd said.

This passage is warning us. That is a serious thing. That God is not to be taken lightly. As if he is a game to play.

Or a tool to be manipulated. To say one thing and do another in regards to anyone is wrong. But in regards to God is especially foolish.

Because as this passage says. Because it's not acting in line with the reality of how things are. He is the king of heaven. He knows all things. He deserves our complete allegiance.

And we need to act with integrity before him. Better not to vow at all. Than to vow and not follow through. These verses it says.

[21 : 03] God isn't looking then. For the kind of one-off spectacular acts. Rather Ecclesiastes says. He is looking for our ongoing humble service. He wants our integrity in following him.

That means that if we say that Jesus is Lord. As all Christians do. That we all live with Jesus as Lord. In all the details of our lives.

Rather than just in some extreme gestures now and then. That means at least partly I think. What we've already been saying. That we'd prioritize listening to God's word.

Gathering as his people. The church around the Bible. Week by week. Having that as part of our daily lives. And in our conversations. That integrity I think as well.

Means living out the mundane. But in so many ways. Kind of radical description of life. Given by the fruit of the spirit. Love, joy, peace, patience.

[22 : 01] Kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness. Self-control. These day-to-day attitudes. These are so often unseen or unappreciated. We're drawn, aren't we?

Toward the spectacular gesture. Maybe in a relationship. It's kind of the expensive gift. Or the special Valentine's Day meal. And there's nothing wrong with those things.

But they cannot take the place. Of that foundation. Of daily commitment. And service. And love. Similarly in our walk with God.

It's not this kind of rollercoaster. Of radical things done for God. To make up for the great depths. Where we've ignored him. But rather to live life well.

Means that constant life of obedience. To God who is in heaven. That we would listen to his words. And having listened. We would live out his words.

[22 : 59] And so why does the Bible have to warn us. Against this. In particular this tendency to promise God more. Than we're able to keep. I think so much of it comes. From the fact that we are prone to.

To reverting to a way of thinking. Where we have to impress God. It's like God has a standard. That we have to meet. And if we dip that. Below that a little bit.

Then we have to do more than that. For a bit. To keep ourselves in credit. It's like the kind of average speed cameras. That you go through. You find you're accidentally doing. Kind of 73 for a little bit. So you have to crawl along.

At 67 for a while. And so long as it averages out. Before the next one. It's all fine. But that's not how the gospel works. For all of us. Our life with God.

Is ups and downs. There are times when we're doing well. We have times when we make mistakes. We want to grow as God's people. But there are times when we struggle. But in those times. When we make mistakes.

[23 : 56] In those times. When we struggle. We don't get back into God's favor. By earning his love again. By promising enough extra.

To make up for what we've missed. No. We come back to God. By simply returning to the gospel. And returning to Jesus. Day after day after day.

By listening again to God's word. To us. That word of the gospel. And what Jesus has done. And it's when we focus on that. That is when.

We're able to respond. With lives of integrity. Of humble service. Of God. Day by day. Because we're not trying to impress God. Or think that we need to. To earn his love.

As if he's a taskmaster. Just waiting for us to fail. But we are living in response. To the love that he has shown us. And we don't have to talk so much.

[24 : 51] About all the things. That we are going to do. Because we can rest. In what Jesus has done. And it says we get. Just how much Jesus has done.

For us. As it's revealed to us. In his word. That's how we are motivated. To give everything. To him. This passage is not saying. God doesn't want your whole life. He just wants the kind of.

Middle of the road. God wants everything. And yet we live that life. Of giving everything. With integrity. Not by trying to earn his favor. But by responding.

To the incredible grace. And mercy. He has shown us. And then that's our final verse. Verse seven. For when dreams increase. And words grow many.

There is vanity. But God is the one. You must fear. Again the preacher here. Calls us to face up. To reality. Face up to the world. We live in.

[25 : 44] In these verses. Face up to. How we relate to God. Our creator. And so we can have various dreams. Often detached. From reality.

The way we think. We would like the world to be. We can talk lots of words. About the things we think. Or the things that we're going to do. And yet ultimately. The preacher says. So much of that is vanity.

Remember that word. Literally means. A breath. And there's nothing solid there. Nothing that can be grasped. But the preacher reminds us. Historically what is. The facts of reality.

But God. Is the one. You must fear. But God. Is the one. You must fear. The fear of God. Is the preacher's. Conclusion. In terms of living.

A wise life. The result of listening. To him well. The motivation. For living with integrity. For him. The fear of God. That's not a fear. Of trying to get away from God.

[26 : 44] But it's a fear. That rightly recognizes. The greatness of God. And our distance. From him. The power of God. And yet. Our need of him.

Far from a perfect analogy. But I sometimes think of. The kind of. The big wave surfers. And their approach to the ocean. To the 60, 70, 80 foot waves. That they seek out.

There is that recognition there. Of the danger. Of the seriousness. Of the power. That whatever their skill level. The ocean is not. Something to be taken lightly.

And yet still. They are drawn into that. In a similar way. We are to recognize. The seriousness. The power of God. And also. The danger. Of not approaching him.

Rightly. Of not listening to his word. Of not walking before him. With integrity. And yet. We are drawn to him. And we recognize. The need of the work of Jesus.

[27 : 41] To be near him. And we see that we need. To listen to his words. Revealing what he has done. Rather than bring our many words. Of what we will do. As through trusting in Jesus.

We can be with him. And live our lives. With integrity. As his people. In response. To the gospel. And in response. To who he. The God of heaven is.

A true wisdom then. Is to fear the Lord. And live in response. To that. It says. We truly grasp. Who God is. That we come to listen. To his words.

And what could be more important. What could be a greater privilege. Than listening. To the words. Of the king of all creation. And having listened. To those words. We then live before him.

With integrity. Knowing that how we relate. To God. The ultimate reality. Of our universe. Is the ultimate measure. For how wisely. We are living. In his universe. We do that prioritizing.

[28 : 38] Listening to God's word. And recognizing the importance. Of integrity. As God's people. As we live for his glory. Let's pray together.

Heavenly Father. We thank you. For your kindness to us. That you have not left. Yourself unknown. Or a mystery. You have not left us.

To guess. At what you're like. Or what pleases you. But you have revealed. Yourself to us. In your word. The Bible. You have revealed.

Your salvation. As it speaks. Of the finished work. Of Jesus. And all that he has done. For us. Lord we ask. That you would forgive us. For the times. When we are so quick.

To speak. So quick. To put across. Our thoughts. And plans. So quick. To highlight. Our idea. Our successes. And strength. So quick.

[29 : 34] To put forward. Our ideas. And suggestions. Lord we pray. That you would help us. Recognize the priority. Of listening to your word. The word of God. In heaven. That we would demonstrate.

Both the importance. Of that. And also the privilege. Of that in our lives. Both individually. And as we come together. As your church. That we would come. In awe of you. And all you've done.

To listen. As you speak to us. And Lord we pray. That in response. To that listening. That we would live lives. In obedience. Of you.

That we would live lives. Of integrity. Before you. That we would live lives. That recognize. Jesus Christ. As Lord. That we would live. The fear of God.

Where we recognize. Your greatness. And our smallness. But that we celebrate. That you have bridged. That gap. Through the work of Jesus. For us. And we pray.

[30 : 29] That that would help us. Not to come. Casually before you. But to come. Trusting wholeheartedly. In the gospel of Jesus. And living for your glory. Please then be with us.

This week. We pray. That we would put into practice. In our lives. And in our church. The teaching of Ecclesiastes. We pray. That through that. We might better live.

For your glory. Day by day. And we pray all these things. In the precious name. Of Jesus Christ. Amen.