

# Tread Guard

Ecclesiastes 5:1-7 September 11, 2024

The British royals maintain a lot of protocols. From their sleep schedule to their dress code to what they eat and how they eat it, they have a long list of the way things should be done.

A lady in the royal family may only wear a tiara indoors and after 6pm, unless it is the day of her wedding. Boys cannot wear long pants until age 8. Wedding bouquets must contain myrtle flowers. Royals must look *into* their teacups while sipping. And they are to be weighed before *and* after Christmas dinner, to prove whether they *really* enjoyed themselves.<sup>1</sup>

There are even protocols concerning their daily steps: When going down a flight of stairs, royal ladies are to always look up while descending and they do not grip any banister that may be available (though gliding their hand *above* it is acceptable). While walking on level ground, they should brush their knees together slightly with each step, to ensure an elegant look.<sup>2</sup>

The Teacher was another royal who paid close attention to step protocols. He starts chapter 5 by saying, "watch your step." But this isn't just etiquette - this is *essential*. In fact, for the first time, the Teacher is going to actually address us directly.<sup>3</sup> It's not "these are some things I've seen from time to time," it's: *You* need to guard *your* steps. From steps, he then moves on to words. *You* need to measure *your* words. From words he then moves to the vows and promises you make to God.

Tonight, we don't just watch the Teacher as he experiences life. He leads us into the presence of Almighty God and implore us to treat the situation seriously.

**Ecclesiastes 5:1 - Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Better to approach in obedience than to offer the sacrifice as fools do, for they ignorantly do wrong.**

These seven verses pulse with this challenge: Why are you doing the things you're doing? Why are you saying the things you're saying? *Specifically* when it comes to your relationship to God.

Now, God's house isn't like the temples Indiana Jones breaks into. If he steps on the wrong spot, a poisoned arrow shoots out. God doesn't set boobytraps for us. And yet, the Teacher gives us a solemn warning: Watch your step. Mind the gap. Pay attention.

We've gathered here tonight in what we call the house of God. Of course, our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit, but we know that gathering as God's people in what we call church is a special and commanded and important aspect of living out our faith. In fact, Hebrews tells us that we should gather together as a church "all the more" as we see the return of the Lord approaching.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cbsnews.com/pictures/25-weird-rules-about-being-a-british-royal/2/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.rd.com/list/royal-family-etiquette/>

<sup>3</sup> Douglas Miller *Ecclesiastes*

Why did you come tonight? The Teacher asks us because it matters. My answer to that question reveals a lot about my relationship with God. It reveals certain assumptions and inclinations.

If I answer, "It's my habit," it would reveal a certain lifelessness in my faith. We *should* gather habitually, but if that's my *main* reason, it reveals that I don't really expect anything supernatural to happen. I don't really believe there will be a transaction between myself and my Savior.

The Teacher wants us to watch our steps. To say to ourselves, "Where am I going right now? Well, I'm going into the presence of my King along with my spiritual family. I have a special opportunity to bring my Savior an offering of thanksgiving and adoration and worship. I'm going into a gathering where I've been promised that Almighty God Himself will meet with us in a special way, to speak and to direct and to build me up and give me comfort." We *believe* these things to be true *doctrinally*, but the Teacher challenges us to ask whether we're actually *walking* in those beliefs.

But it's not just about the *why*. The *how* matters too. God cares about the *way* we do things. Even if our doctrine is correct, our practice might fall out of step. Think of safety protocols at work. We take the training, recognize the possible dangers. But then you see people not walking in the protocol.

In this verse there's a difference between the religious activity of fools and the religious activity of those who are pleasing to God. The Teacher says, "approach in obedience." Your version may say "draw near to hear." We don't just come to God's house to check a box. We come close to God so we can *listen* and then *obey*. There's meant to be an interaction and communication.

When a person enters God's house without guarding his steps, he ends up making a serious mistake. He may become a legalist. He does the motions, but it's out of routine, out of self-righteousness. He's not *listening*. He doesn't come with an expectation that he's actually going to have a personal connection with God Who has something to say. And so, his sacrifice is foolish.

There were times in Israel's history where individuals or the nation at large would be going through the motions and God would send them a message that was, essentially, "I don't want the blood of your bulls. I don't recognize that fast you're doing. You're not obeying Me because you're not *listening* to Me. So don't bother with your sacrifices."

**Ecclesiastes 5:2 - <sup>2</sup>Do not be hasty to speak, and do not be impulsive to make a speech before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few.**

Ours is a culture of hasty and hollow words. But words can set an entire life on fire. We learn at the end of our text that they help *create* the futility that makes the world such a difficult place to live in.

When it comes to our communication with God - our prayer - we should be careful and purposeful about our words. Not hasty. But, what about "pray without ceasing?" What about when I don't know *what* to pray and I'm just calling out to God in groans and anguish? That's fine. That's not what I'm

talking about or the Teacher is talking about. Even the Teacher would acknowledge that God is *always* watching and listening and keeping account of what we say and do.

But when we come to God in prayer on purpose, it should be thoughtful and deliberate.

For an example of what the Teacher means, we can look to Luke 18. There a Pharisee was praying loud and proud about how great he was - how glad he was that he wasn't like this disgusting tax collector. The Teacher would say, "Don't do that." Well, of course we wouldn't do *that*.

Let's look at a closer example: Peter on the Mount of Transfiguration. We'd have to say he was a little hasty to speak. "Lord, how about I set up three shelters? One for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah?" In fact, Mark tells us Peter blurted that out because he *didn't* know what to say.

What was God's response to Peter? "This is My Beloved Son...*listen* to Him." Again an emphasis on being attentive to God and *hearing* what He would say. Again, the suggestion that God is not just a powerful Being we pay off with certain religious activities, but a *Person* Who desires to have a real and personal relationship with those who worship Him.

As we pray, the Teacher invites to remember Who we're talking to: The God of heaven. The Judge. The Supreme Sovereign. The Creator and Master and Commander of all things.

The other day someone said something that caught my attention: We can't even look at the sun (which is 93 million miles away) for more than a second or two before we have to look away. But when it comes to the *Maker* of the sun - the One Who contains the nuclear fusion of the sun - we often don't consider His glorious, awesome power the way we should.

**Ecclesiastes 5:3 - <sup>3</sup> Just as dreams accompany much labor, so also a fool's voice comes with many words.**

The Teacher mentions dreams a couple of times in these verses and commentators have a hard time nailing down exactly what they think his point is. But here it's a simple comparison. The stress dream you have before the big job interview doesn't help or benefit you. Neither do the many words of a fool who's thoughtlessly speaking to God - blathering on without consideration.

This doesn't mean that all prayers should be short. Sometimes Jesus prayed all night. All of John 17 is Jesus praying. But long and flowery prayers don't automatically signify spiritual depth. Some of the most profound prayers were extremely short. Nehemiah's prayer is one of our favorites. Or that tax collector from earlier: "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner." The challenge is to measure.

**Ecclesiastes 5:4 - <sup>4</sup> When you make a vow to God, don't delay fulfilling it, because he does not delight in fools. Fulfill what you vow.**

From steps to words, now to vows. In the Old Testament, people made a lot more vows to God than we typically do. It feels like every few chapters someone is saying, "May God punish me and do so severely if I don't do *this* or *that* by the end of the day."

Vows to God are voluntary, but they are binding. We live in a time where you can make and break promises as often as you like without any major consequences. There are a lot of *relational* consequences, but no one is going to stone you if you break a promise.

But we need to be very careful about the promises we make to God - the *commitments* we make to God. Making and breaking these sort of vows to the Lord is the fast track to foolishness.

It's not always wrong to make a formal vow to the Lord. Paul did in Acts 18. But it's definitely something we shouldn't be rash about. The Teacher simply wants us to consider why we're doing it and what we're promising. And when we promise, *do* what you promised without delay.

**Ecclesiastes 5:5 - <sup>5</sup> Better that you do not vow than that you vow and not fulfill it.**

Jesus expanded on these very topics in His sermon on the mount. He said, "Instead of making a bunch of empty oaths, let your 'yes' be 'yes' and your 'no' be 'no.'"<sup>4</sup> But that doesn't mean we shouldn't make commitments to the Lord. In fact, we're commanded to make certain commitments. But, when we do, we should take them seriously because *God* takes them seriously.

Take the marriage commitment. If you are married, unless you had a *very* non-traditional wedding, you said vows "before God and these witnesses. "And you know what? *God cares* about those vows and He expects you to keep them. When we don't, God is not pleased.

Your words matter. Your promises matter. Your integrity matters. Why? Because your *life* matters. God has great intentions for your life and for your place in the world. He has a part for you to play in His ongoing work. When we stop caring about our integrity, what we do, what we say, how we act, what we promise, then it impacts God's ability to do what He wants to do in our lives.

**Ecclesiastes 5:6 - <sup>6</sup> Do not let your mouth bring guilt on you, and do not say in the presence of the messenger that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry with your words and destroy the work of your hands?**

Rather than take responsibility, the fool tries to talk his way out of his poor choices. And though God is love and full of tender mercy toward us, we must recognize that we can *anger* Him. We can make choices that cause Him to stand in our way so He can put a stop to what we're doing. Think of Ananias and Sapphira. That's not the kind of interaction with God that we want. But if we don't consider what our relationship with Him is really about, if we don't consider His holiness, if we don't acknowledge His authority over our lives, we will not please God, we will anger Him.

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew 5:33-37

**Ecclesiastes 5:7 - <sup>7</sup>For many dreams bring futility; so do many words. Therefore, fear God.**

At the very end of the book this will be the same conclusion: Fear God. *That's* how we maintain a proper posture and proper protocols and proper relation with this God Who loves us.

Note here that my many words can actually contribute to the *hevel* problem of the world. So far, *hevel* has been something we *experience* - a frustrating byproduct of a fallen world. But here we see that we can be little *hevel* factories, too. We are reminded that we have responsibilities when it comes to our words, our actions, our steps, our promises, and our relationships to God and men.

There is a subtle reminder here that your life is not about your dreams, it is about God's will. Now, God's will for you is *good*. But these seven verses are powerful for recalibrating our perspective. We have the negative example of this foolish person, breezing into the temple, praying whatever, speaking words that don't matter, focused on all his big dreams. He has doctrinal beliefs but doesn't walk in them. He *doesn't* fear God. He doesn't reverence Him or respect Him or listen to Him. In the end all he accomplishes is creating futility for himself and others and angering God.

So, does the Teacher mean that we should cower in terror as we come to church? That we should only pray words that we *know* are approved by God? Some Bible commentators use this passage to say that God "cannot be approached casually." Or that it is *sin* to be "casual" with God.<sup>5</sup>

But formalism and terror is not what fearing God is about. Fearing God *does* include respect and reverence and a growing understanding of the awesome, almighty, supreme power of God, but it also recognizes what God has revealed about Himself. That He is gracious and loving and kind and that He desires a personal, communicative relationship with you individually. Fearing God means understanding the incredible privilege of being in Him and He in us.

When we walk in relationship with God, we discover that He is excited to *teach* us how to properly fear Him. He tells us in Proverbs, "Listen to Me and I will teach you the way of wisdom and guide your steps."<sup>6</sup> He gives His word to light our steps so that we *can* guard them and walk worthy.

And consider the fact that even though God dwells in heaven, for *some reason* He has a house on earth. Why does He keep a house here? If you lived in heaven, would you want a house on earth?

Let me ask you this: Would you buy a summer home in Gaza? How about Darfur? Why would God have a house on earth? *Many* houses? Because His love for us is so great. Because His desire to commune with us is so great. Because He *wants* true, intimate friendship with us.

There was a lot of formalism in the worship of God in the Gospels. Jesus came and dismantled that formalism. He told us to become like loving, affectionate children if we want to enter the Kingdom

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<sup>5</sup> See Kidner, Eaton

<sup>6</sup> Proverbs 4:10-11 *paraphrased*

of heaven.<sup>7</sup> When Jesus died, the veil in the temple was torn from top to bottom, signifying that God was granting access to His presence to *everyone*. The old formalism was made of no effect.

But that intimate access doesn't mean our attitude and behavior toward God no longer matters. Approaching an almighty and holy God is still a very serious thing and we should take it seriously, while also understanding what He has revealed about His character and nature - His kindness and patience and long-suffering and all the rest. So, this idea that approaching God must always be totally formal just isn't true. What others might call "casualness," we might call gracious intimacy.

*But* the tearing of the veil didn't do away with the fear of God. Our attitude and approach toward God can still anger Him. Just ask the Corinthian church. What we're doing, how we do it, and why we do it matters. Your relationship with God is a serious thing and it requires care and attention.

Let me close with a practical application of these principles: Communion. We recognize that communion is an "ordinance" of the church - it's a God-ordained ceremony.<sup>8</sup> You're not saved because you take communion. *But*, we *are* commanded to observe this ceremony. Jesus said, "do this in remembrance of Me."

On top of communion being a *memorial*, when we take it we are also agreeing to a *covenant* with the Lord - the *new* covenant. So, by taking communion, you are making a *vow* to God. Paul sounds a lot like the Teacher of Ecclesiastes when he says, "Be careful about making this promise to God. Don't be foolish when you come to the Lord's table." In fact, we're warned that there are times when we *shouldn't* take communion. And we're told that there were Christians in Corinth who were taking communion in an unworthy way, so when they drank from the cup, they were drinking judgment to themselves. Sickness, weakness, and even death was being meted out to them as discipline.<sup>9</sup>

Paul's instruction to them was very similar to the Teacher's: Examine yourself. Guard your steps. Is there unrepented sin in your life? Is there something in my heart or life that is grieving the Lord or angering Him? Is there something that needs to be dealt with before I draw close to listen to God?

Our relationship with God matters and therefore our behavior, attitudes, and conversation *in* that relationship all matter. You don't need to be afraid, but be purposeful about walking worthy according to the path He has set before us, knowing that there is an eternal weight of glory at the end of the road.

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<sup>7</sup> Matthew 18:1-3

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.gotquestions.org/ordinances-sacraments.html>

<sup>9</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:17-32