

“Credo, Domine; adjuva incredulitatem meam,” Mark 9:24.

“Domine, volumus Jesum videre,” John 12:21.

ECCLESIASTES 5

¹Guard 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 do wrong.



Why is it that the same action can be either good or bad? C.S. Lewis suggests: say a man trips you in the train station on accident, and you wouldn't be too upset. Say another man fails to trip you, but he was trying to trip you on purpose. Why is it that you only get mad about the one who did it on purpose?

It depends on the heart. Consider a doctor telling you that you're healthy. This is great to hear, even if you didn't expect to hear any bad news. But if the doctor told you this after mistakenly diagnosing you with heart failure, you'd be all the more relieved. It depends on the heart. Tears of sadness or tears of joy? Violence or self-defense? Love or lust? It depends on the heart. One and the same action can be either good or bad, but it depends. It depends on the heart.

So it is with going to the house of God to worship. Is it good or bad? It depends on the heart. Unless we are justified by Christ alone—saved by the blood of the Lamb; that is, put our faith in the works of Christ, not our own—we will never enter God's house with right motives. It depends on the heart.

THE PATH AND PITFALLS OF PUBLIC WORSHIP

1. This is God's house

Solomon leads us on the path “*to the house of God.*” In Solomon's day “the *house of God*” was the magnificent temple the king had built in Jerusalem. This was the center of worship for God's people. The annual festivals saw Jerusalem packed with pilgrims who had come up to the temple. The great altar of sacrifice in front of the temple filled the air daily with smoke from the endless burnt offerings.

Now among the works and doings of mankind under the sun, there are a great host of things that are wise and keep us on the path of life, but might also be evil or belong to the meaningless vanities that soon pass away. Two sinners might be doing the same thing, yet the one is doing good and the other is doing evil. The value of our outward works in the sight of God depends on the motives of the heart. Going to worship belongs in this class of works according to our text: *1Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Draw near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they do wrong.*

Then how is a churchgoer supposed to go to church? Solomon says, *“Guard your steps when you go to the house of God.”* You are not a fair-weather Christian. You go to church when it is both cold and warm, rainy and windy, and that is proper. On Sunday morning a Christian doesn't hope that bad weather will be an excuse to stay home. Use Sunday to rejoice with King David's friends and say, *“Let's go to the house of the Lord.”* Before you enter, you wipe your feet to keep the house of God clean. But much rather should you wipe your heart and purge your mind of sinful thoughts. Leave the thoughts of worldly work and business at home. The cares of riches and pleasures of this life in the house of worship entangle your soul, foreclose your heart against the Word, and make your ears thick and deaf.

What Solomon actually means by saying *“guard your steps”* he explains by saying, *“And draw near to listen.”* To listen is the chief and great object of going to church. God has given us “ears to hear” His Word, and the Lord Jesus brought this up often to His disciples. *“He who has ears, let him hear”*; *“Whoever is of God hears God's words”*; and again, *“Blessed are they who hear the Word of God and keep it.”* It is of utmost importance to hear. Mary and Martha both welcomed the Lord, but Mary drew near to listen—the one thing needful. Let each Christian say to the morning of worship, “Welcome, day of glory. My Lord bled and died for me and rested in the tomb to pay the wages of my sin. But behold, at early morning He came forth from the grave triumphant for me. Even for me He has brought life and immortality to light. Now today I lay aside earthly thoughts and worldly business, I'll hasten to the house of my God to hear the Word of Jesus Christ, and I will glorify His name.” That is the true guarding of the steps. That's a faithful frame of mind on the way to church.

Now, it doesn't make sense that someone is truly pure because she goes to church. Nor does it make sense that she is doing good when she is going to

church. If you see someone headed to church and think, “That’s a good Christian,” that’s right on your part, because in all things love assumes the best. Nevertheless, if you could read hearts, you would know that sinners go to church with the goal to gain social credit, to win respect, or to draw customers, and there are those who go to church from sheer force of habit. Are those right motives for going to church? They are evil motives, because they are making the church subservient to their own personal and selfish ends.

Churchgoing is good, but sinners know just how to make churchgoing into a sin.

The first temptation was not to murder, lie, or steal, but to challenge the Word of God. The tempter’s tactics haven’t changed.

2. This is why we gather here

So many go to the house of worship to give what Solomon calls here the “*sacrifice of fools*.” What kind of sacrifice is this? Who are they that bring it? The words themselves show it clearly, “*To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they do wrong.*” The word “sacrifice” directs us back to the old Jewish sacrifices, which were all shadows pointing ahead to the One Great Sacrifice for sin to be made by the promised Savior. The priests were supposed to instruct the people on the true meaning of the sacrifices. Many among the Jews paid no attention to the promise of a Savior, but they thought that offering a sheep or bull was enough to win God’s favor. It is this notion that Solomon called the “*sacrifice of fools*” and did wrong. It was obviously a foolish idea to think that a sheep or bull could reconcile the sinner to God, and it was doing wrong to bring a sacrifice with that motive, because it belittles the grace of God. For God “*desires mercy, not sacrifice.*” “*To heed is better than the fat of rams.*”

So going to church as New Testament believers in order to earn God’s attention or to earn God’s favor is undoubtedly bringing a fool’s sacrifice. God commanded us to worship Him, but even if we could do everything He commanded us, we nevertheless would have to confess ourselves unprofitable servants who have done nothing more than our bound duty. By our works, we cannot enrich God. He doesn’t need our services. In His Word He promises to give freely and urges all to come and receive. He has so much to give us. He shows us the path of life. “*Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.*”

The book of Ecclesiastes is a treatise on the true path of human life. This book teaches that the fool sets his heart on things that vanish, but the wise man seeks after things that last ... things that abide forever. Solomon concludes this entire book with the words, "*Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good or evil*" (Eccl. 12:13-14). Our life in this world is a state of preparation, and that sinner is truly wise who makes use of his time to prepare for the judgment to come. Therefore, this book of Solomon teaches the right and true philosophy of human life.

It's hard and confusing to criticize really good actions. But "*God will bring every work into judgment.*" He will find no work 100% pure and sin-free. In sales, you sell your product out of self-interest. Why perform a service? Do you want to perform a service to make people happy? Yeah! Is it self-serving? Yes. Is that Christ-focused? Maybe. In comforting a friend, are you trying to comfort your friend? Yes. Are you serving your savior-complex a little by being there? Probably. Is that Christ-focused? Maybe. Is singing a solo at church done to God's glory and the benefit of the hearers? Yes. Is it also drawing attention to yourself? At least a little. Is that Christ focused? Maybe. "*Whatever is not of faith is sin,*" and "*to the pure all things are pure.*" Both our sins need forgiving and our blessed actions need blessing. Only the Christ who died forgives and blesses like that. If you don't have the cross of Christ at the center, you are subject to error. Your works are justified by Christ, not by your motives. No, not even by your motives.

So should those doing evil stay away from God's house? **If evildoers couldn't be churchgoers, we would all need to stay home today.** Of course you should attend church often and commune often. Yes, everyone who can still use limbs and reason should be familiar to this place. Moreover, everyone should come with pure motives of the heart, so as to reap the right benefit. So unclog your ears to the Triune God who reminds you of your baptism in His name. Eat up that good bread and drink up that wine in order to lose some pounds of guilt on your heart. Pay attention and learn from your God. **That is just why we gather here.** An action done by God is never bad, and He takes away your deaf hearts and dull ears for your good; i.e., the good of those who love Him. **Amen.**

Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope, through the power of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**