

The Vanity of Wealth

📖 Ecclesiastes 5:8-17

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Last time we looked at Ecclesiastes 5:1-7, a section on vain worship in the OT as illustrated by the taking of vows, but with application to every aspect of worship, whether it be prayer or praise or exposition of the word. In 5:1 the Jew was to approach God carefully. For the Jew, the place of approach was the Temple in Jerusalem. As they arrived they should listen to the teaching of the priests concerning how to offer sacrifices, which in this case are the sacrifice of vows, known as a votive or free will offering. But Solomon observed that as they approached God they did not heed the teaching of the priests, and so came up improperly, which was doing evil, even though they did not know they were doing evil. In 5:2, Solomon instructs saying, they should not be hurried in speech or impulsive in thought so that they would bring up a matter in the presence of God that really should not be brought up. God wanted them to think through carefully before just starting to flap their jaws making promises to Him. It would help them do this if they remembered that God is the Creator and they are the creature. And frankly, when considering that, it might be best not to say much at all and not to make any vows. Vows are taken seriously to God. In 5:3 a comparison is made between one who has many dreams, which indicates many concerns, and the one who makes many vows, which indicates he is a fool. In 5:4, let's say they do make a vow. If they do that, they should make sure they fulfill it. It makes God angry when they don't. In 5:5 the seriousness of a vow is in view when it says it's better not to vow than it is to vow and not keep it. In 5:6 the tongue is a source of sin and so it must be kept under control. They shouldn't make a vow and then think they could come back later and say, "oh, I didn't mean that, it was a mistake." God won't accept that. Once they vowed they had to keep the vow. And if they didn't then God would get angry and destroy the work of their hands. That means He would literally turn their hard work into nothing. So in 5:7 Solomon says that this kind of worship is vain, it's not true worship, and so one way for the OT Israelite to lose his hard earned goods, was to make false vows. Instead, they should fear God.

By application, we said whenever you draw near to worship in the local church, it should be done properly, understanding that there's more going on than meets the eye. In corporate worship we draw near to God in His heavenly temple and how we behave and offer sacrifice in His house should be in accordance with His rules. Sacrifice must be done orderly and with respect and thought. To come otherwise, is to come in a way that is not

acceptable to God, and is worse than not coming at all. For foolishly worshiping God there is loss of reward. Religious ritual and ceremony are examples of foolish worship. God is not fooled by long prayers and repetitive liturgies. Doing that is annoying God and asking for divine discipline.

Today we come to Ecclesiastes 5:8-9, a short section which describes vain justice. Solomon left the Temple and went to the halls of justice. However, what he saw here was not justice, but injustice. This is another way people who work hard lose their money, they lose it to corrupt politicians. This should not be surprising. In 5:8 he says, **If you see oppression of the poor and denial of justice and righteousness in the province, do not be shocked at the sight; for one official watches over another official, and there are higher officials over them. After all, a king who cultivates the field is an advantage to the land.** The meaning of verse 8 is clear, there is a hierarchy of officials involved in injustice and unrighteousness, but the translation of verse 9 is difficult to understand. So we'll explain verse 8 and then work a little to understand verse 9.

In verse 8 Solomon said **If you see oppression of the poor and denial of justice and righteousness in the province, do not be shocked at the sight.** Partiality in justice has been a common feature of all judicial systems. The first human judicial system was after the Flood. That is when God instituted human government and the right to take human life, which implies a judicial system. Of course, God knew that when He instituted human government it would be managed by corrupt people. Nevertheless, He did so in order to curb sin and slow the corruption of societies. Of course, people suffered under these judicial systems, but it is better to have an imperfect judicial system than not one at all. Solomon says when you see injustice you should not be **shocked.** His reason is because **one official watches over another official,** and there are **higher officials over them.** So there is a hierarchy of corruption in the government. In the NT the tax system in Rome involved tax collectors. This was a very desirable position because of the wealth one could make as a tax collector. Yet the whole thing was corrupt because the positions were gained by those who purchased them. Everyone in the government was in this together and the higher officials were watching over the lower officials and everyone took their cut. It's always been like that since after the Flood. Where there is money to be made, there will be corruption at all levels of the organization, usually starting at the top.

Now those who suffer are typically **the poor** because they have no means to fight the giant organization or government. Since the justice system is part of the government, the halls of **justice** are corrupted by greed and vice. But Solomon says, **don't be shocked at the sight, don't be shocked.** It's not right, but it's not unexpected. To be shocked is to have an overly optimistic view of mankind. When it comes to politics, the difference between liberalism and conservatism is how they view man. Liberals always view man as fundamentally good whereas conservatives always view man as fundamentally evil. The Bible says man is fundamentally evil, that we have a sinful nature or disposition, inherited from Adam, and this sinful disposition governs the natural man, meaning that whenever a man is presented with the opportunity to make a buck, he will naturally exploit it to the detriment of others and thereby deny them **justice and righteousness.**

Verse 9 in the NASB is confusing because this is a negative context, but it presents the king in a positive light.

After all, a king who cultivates the field is an advantage to the land. This can't be saying that the **king who cultivates** a corrupt judicial system is advantageous for the kingdom, because it's not. So what does it mean?

There are several difficulties in the Hebrew text as evidenced by differences in translations. The NASB translators chose to translate this so that Solomon is commenting positively on having a king. In this view Solomon is saying that even though government officials are corrupt and deny justice at the expense of the poor, it is better to have a government than it is to have anarchy. Now it is true that it is better to have some government than none, but that's just not fitting in the context. The context is how governments have a corrupt hierarchy that preys on the poor in society. And it is difficult to exclude the king from that hierarchy of corruption. So another view is that verse 9 should be translated more like the NIV, which says, "the increase from the land is taken by all; the king himself profits from the fields." In other words, even the king himself is part of the government corruption. In fact, he's the top dog, and it's because he is requiring so much revenue from the common man that there is so much corruption in the hierarchy of his officials. This fits the context. As Donald Glenn said, "Solomon described the oppressive exactions of officials at all levels. They were watching not to protect **the poor and oppressed** (cf. Ecc. 4:1) but to find ways to squeeze revenue out of the officials under them. At the head of this whole corrupt system was **the king who himself profited from the fields** of the oppressed."¹ What this corruption does is rob the common man of the potential fruit from all his labor. That's what this section is all about; how hard earned goods can be lost. And we all know this scheme from the taxation schemes that are perpetrated on us. We end up paying gobs and gobs of money to support government programs. I used to work for the government. I remember grant money being wasted on things that were never used just so they could show that the grant money was used so they could get more grant money the next year. And because of that everyone paid more taxes. So are we shocked that there is waste and corruption? Solomon says we shouldn't be shocked. This is the way sinful men operate. If there's waste, there's waste, so long as I get mine.

As a brief aside, commentators think that King Solomon would never condemn himself as being involved in such schemes, so they argue that Solomon could not have written this. However, first of all, it is clear that Solomon is the only one who meets all the criteria for having authored this book. He is the only king who ruled over the United Kingdom as a son of David, from the city of Jerusalem with great wisdom. Secondly, Solomon is not saying that he observed this in his own kingdom, but that he observed this in general among all kingdoms. Thirdly, 1 Sam 8:10-18 and 1 Kings 12:1-10 indicates that there was corruption and oppression in Solomon's kingdom. 1 Sam 8:10-18 is the passage where the people asked Samuel for a king like all the other nations. After taking this to the Lord, he returned to the people and said, "This will be the procedure of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and place *them* for himself in his chariots and among his horsemen and they will run before his chariots. ¹²He will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and of fifties, and *some* to do his plowing and to reap his harvest and to make his weapons of war and equipment for his chariots. ¹³He will also take your daughters for perfumers and cooks and bakers. ¹⁴He will take the best of your fields and your

vineyards and your olive groves and give *them* to his servants. ¹⁵“He will take a tenth of your seed and of your vineyards and give to his officers and to his servants. ¹⁶“He will also take your male servants and your female servants and your best young men and your donkeys and use *them* for his work. ¹⁷“He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his servants. ¹⁸“Then you will cry out in that day because of your king whom you have chosen for yourselves, but the Lord will not answer you in that day.” This was a warning of the difficulties they would face if they had a king like all the other nations. Yet the people still insisted they wanted a king. The Lord gave them a king like all the other nations in Saul. But the Lord rejected Saul and gave them David, and promised him an eternal throne, eternal kingdom and eternal dynasty. Then God gave them Solomon. It was Solomon’s kingdom that expanded so greatly. When his son Rehoboam came to the throne, the event in 1 Kings 12:1-10 indicates that Solomon’s empire ended in the oppressive practices described here. In that event the people of Israel came and spoke to Rehoboam, saying, “Your father made our yoke hard; now therefore lighten the hard service of your father and his heavy yoke which he put on us, and we will serve you.” So just because Solomon’s observation is a general one, about all kingdoms, it was also true of his own kingdom. He did this and his officials did this. And he still authored it because he later repented before he wrote it.

So in this short pericope, Eccl 5:8-9, Solomon discusses the corrupt practices of government officials that distort justice in order to line their pockets. He is decrying the fact that the poor and common man lose the fruits of their labor because of this injustice.

So far then, this chapter has described two ways a man might lose his hard earnings. In 5:1-7 he might lose them to God through false worship. In 5:8-9 he might lose them to corrupt government officials by extortion. Now in 5:10-12 he describes how a man might lose the enjoyment of his assets through three avenues; his own covetousness, freeloaders and insomnia.

In 5:10 we see how covetousness deprives us of the enjoyment of money. **He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves abundance with its income. This too is vanity.** Now Solomon is not warning against having money. Everyone needs money to live in this world. As Wiersbe said, “There is no escaping the fact that we need a certain amount of money in order to live in this world...”² But what Solomon is warning us against is the love of money. He says if you love money you will not be satisfied with money. What he means is that when you get some money you will want more money and when you get more you will find that you still want more and more and this will only continue. You’ll never be satisfied. And yet, as much as we know this to be true, we still often think this way ourselves. If we are greedy or we are doing all we can to make more money, or worse, we are trying to find ways to cheat others out of money, then we have fallen into this trap. We are trying to find satisfaction in life in a place that satisfaction cannot be found. We are thinking that if we just get to the end of the rainbow we will find a treasure waiting there. This is a lie. Of course, this is not talking about trying to make ends meet. This is talking about getting rich. And by getting rich people think they will be satisfied and fulfilled because all their problems will be solved. One of the men I converse with often says that

"Money may not solve every problem, but it solves 99% of them!" Others say, "Well, money may not be the number one thing in life, but it's way ahead of whatever is number two!" In reality, there are few things that people think are more important than money. That is why it is such a sore topic and that is why Jesus had to repeatedly underscore the dangers of loving money in the Gospels. For example, in Luke 12:15 He said, "Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions." In that passage He illustrated by saying there was a very wealthy man who had such an abundance he had no place to store all his crops. Instead of giving the abundance away, he decided to tear down his smaller barns and build larger ones to store all the crops. He thought this would solve his problem so he could take it easy in the years to come and just live off the fat of his abundance. But what the man did not know was that his soul was required of him that very night! Jesus says that man was a fool. His greed blinded him into thinking that a good life was the result of riches. He was wrong. That is not the way to a good life. Greed cannot result in a good life. Paul said to Timothy in 1 Tim 6:17, "Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy. Instruct them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed." Life indeed is giving. Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than receive." Storing up wealth will not make you happy, giving to others will. This is one of Jesus' startling teachings. He was able to unlock our minds to think about everything differently. In this case it is more blessed to give than receive, and the reason is because we were made to give. So the reason it will not make you happy to be greedy is because it is contrary to how you were made. Let's just say this, if you're greedy, you're malfunctioning. The bottom line is that verse 10 shows how covetousness deprives us of enjoyment of money, because it is contrary to how we are made.

Verse 11 shows a second way we may lose the enjoyment of money is freeloaders. **When good things increase, those who consume them increase. So what is the advantage to their owners except to look on?** When you come into money, suddenly people begin to surround you and consume the money. How many times have we see a 20-year old basketball or football star sign a multi-million-dollar contract only to see them reduced to poverty by the age of 35? They have no wisdom and so they go buy a huge house, luxury cars, a pool and everything else you can imagine, only to find that the number of people they support suddenly explodes. People start coming out of the closet from everywhere and wanting to hang out at your house. Day in and day out the new millionaire foots the bill for food, booze and entertainment. That is not a modern lifestyle. Solomon observed that. And the trouble is there is nothing the rich sports star can do. So Solomon asks, **what is the advantage to their owners except to look on?** All he can do is watch all he earns get eaten up by freeloaders. On top of this the IRS is at his door deciding that he owes the government more money. And so what is the end of all this? There is no satisfaction in making a ton of money since all you get to see is everyone else consume it.

In verse 12 Solomon shows a third way the rich may lose the enjoyment of their money, insomnia. He teaches by way of contrast. **The sleep of the working man is pleasant, whether he eats little or much; but the full**

stomach of the rich man does not allow him to sleep. The comparison here is between a common working man and a rich man and what kind of **sleep** they get. The **working man** puts in a full day's labor, goes home and has a meal, and whether it is a **little** or **much**, the man **sleeps** well. But the rich man goes to bed every night with a **full stomach** and does not get much **sleep**. What is the reason? Well, one could argue that the rich man ate rich foods that caused him to have an upset stomach, but it's more likely that something else is meant. The Living Bible is a freer translation but probably gets it right when it says, "The man who works hard sleeps well whether he eats little or much, but the rich must worry and suffer insomnia." The truth is the rich man is worried about his wealth and how to protect it from others, so he can't sleep well. The consequence of poor sleep is poor health. Wiersbe said, "More than one preacher has mentioned John D. Rockefeller in his sermons as an example of a man whose life was almost ruined by wealth. At the age of fifty-three, Rockefeller was the world's only billionaire, earning about a million dollars a week. But he was a sick man who lived on crackers and milk and could not sleep because of worry. When he started giving his money away, his health changed radically and he lived to celebrate his ninety-eighth birthday!" So "Yes, it's good to have the things that money can buy, provided you don't lose the things that money can't buy."³ Money can't make you sleep better. Money can only make you worry and that makes for bad health. You need to re-evaluate your priorities.

So three ways there you can lose enjoyment of wealth; through covetousness, because we are not designed to be greedy, but to give, through freeloaders, because they will flock to you like flies if you get rich, and through insomnia, because you are so worried about protecting your money. It is not really fun to be rich and that is what Solomon turns to next.

In Eccl 5:13-17 Solomon looks at how accumulating wealth can result in misery. In other words, there are more pitfalls to having money than there are to benefits. It's funny how when I have taught on the pitfalls of wealth I have always had people tell me, "Yeah, but it's better to be wealthy than it is to be poor." And yet, the only people who say that have never really been rich. Those who have been on both sides are the only ones qualified to speak intelligently on the subject. And the Scriptures, of course tell us in James 1:9-10 that both wealth and poverty are difficult tests and they are both to respond a certain way. "But the brother of humble circumstances is to glory in his high position;" That is, he is supposed to boast in his spiritual position, "and the rich man is to glory in his humiliation," meaning he is supposed to boast in his spiritual position in the day he loses all his wealth, "because like flowering grass he will pass away." The Scriptures are clear that each is difficult. But the Scriptures are also clear that there are more pitfalls to having money than there are to being poor. Think of how many times the Scriptures warn against the dangers of money vs how many times they warn against the dangers of being poor. There is not one warning against being poor, only of being rich. Matt 19:23-24, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." 1 Tim 6:10, "For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs." Matt 6:24, "You cannot serve God and wealth." Over and over the Bible says that wealth is a great danger. And yet people continue to say, "Well, just let me have some so I can

decide for myself." And then they get some and it ruins them. Verse 13 is describing how it ruins them, **There is a grievous evil which I have seen under the sun: riches being hoarded by their owner to his hurt.** Here is the man who is hoarding wealth. It is not just people who have their lawns filled with old toilets, sinks, cars, tractor parts, shelves and all kinds of other junk that are hoarders. The one who piles up wealth is also a hoarder of sorts. And that to **his own hurt.** It's not exactly clear what the **hurt** is here, but the words **grievous evil** could be translated "depressing misfortune." And so the **hurt** could be the psychological depression that results from what happens in verse 14.

Verse 14, **When those riches were lost through a bad investment and he had fathered a son, then there was nothing to support him.** In the NASB it translates **bad investment**, and it can refer to a bad business investment or venture, but the term seems broader here, and the HALOT says "bad luck," but I prefer to translate it "some misfortune." Something happened to the man's fortune. There are a lot of unpredictable things that can happen financially. You can be sued, you can be robbed, an investment can go sour, a business venture can go south. In this case something like this happened and poof, the fortune he was hoarding was gone. And the sad thing was that **he had fathered a son** and **there was nothing to support him**, meaning, there was no inheritance to give him. So all those years of hard labor and storing up and in the end there was nothing to give his son. It's a very sad story, but a very true story. And to have to go through this is a very difficult thing to come to grips with. You have basically worked your whole life to build up a fortune and overnight it disappears. So it's going to hurt this man and the hurt is the mental anguish and psychological depression that results.

Now verse 15 deals with the man who hoards his wealth but doesn't lose it in some misfortune. This happens too. This man is able to maintain his wealth throughout his life. But then what? **As he had come naked from his mother's womb, so will he return as he came. He will take nothing from the fruit of his labor that he can carry in his hand.** In other words, even if you are able to keep your wealth all your life, one day you're going to die and you can't take any of that with you. So you spent all your life earning and earning so that you had an abundance, and then you die and you can't take any of that with you. So you don't get to enjoy any of it.

Verse 16 **This also is a grievous evil**—meaning something depressing, **exactly as a man is born, thus will he die. So what is the advantage to him who toils for the wind?** What gain is there, asks Solomon, if you go out of this world the same way you were born into it? There's no net gain. All that work for absolutely nothing. So why did you work so hard. Why did you make so much money? Even the prospect of doing all that and then having nothing is very depressing.

Verse 17 describes the mental depression and psychological illness that results just from thinking about it. **Throughout his life he also eats in darkness with great vexation, sickness and anger.** The guy ends up living in darkness, with great vexation to his spirit and with mental illness and anger. That is no way to live. But when you hoard wealth this is what happens. You store up and store up and everyone is always trying to get your money and freeloader off of you and you can't sleep because you are trying to protect this wealth and here

comes the IRS and your wife divorces and sues you for half and you go on some business venture and lose it all so you have no inheritance to pass on to your son, or you luck out and maintain your wealth, but the whole time you are mentally distressed about the fact that you have worked all your life and now you are at the end of your life and you are going to die and you can't take any of it with you.

Now how many of you want to be rich? It's not fun to be rich. It's fine to have money, and we all have to have money to make it through life, and having a little extra to enjoy is exactly that, enjoyable and meant to be enjoyed. But to think that money is going to make you happy and to become greedy so that you are just accumulating, accumulating, is going to rob you of life. It's going to destroy your health, it's going to depress you, it's going to no end and then you are going to die and you can't take any of it with you.

Now that is all said, but what we want to do now is take a few minutes to remind ourselves of some of the Scriptures that fill in our thinking about money and wealth. First, you do need money to make it through life. This passage is not against making money. Money is a necessity for the present world. You have to have food, you have to have a place to live, you have to have clothes to wear. The way to make money is to work for it. Working is the first divine institution in Genesis and we should work and receive a paycheck for the work we have done. Second, having a lot of money will not make you happy. Everyone says, well, give me some and let me decide for myself. But to say that reveals that you believe it will make you happy. Third, money can provide some happiness. With money you can purchase things that you enjoy, whether it's a bible or a tool or a painting or a house or a car. The Bible is not saying that money can't provide some happiness, just that money will never satisfy you, that you need something more, you need a living relationship with God. He's the only One who will satisfy you. Fourth, making money should be balanced with enjoying the fruits of your labor. There's nothing to life if all you are doing is earning, earning, earning and never enjoying. That is a sorry way to live. That is a depressing way to live. That is an unhealthy way to live. There should always be balance. Fifth, it is more blessed to give than receive. Most people don't believe this because they've never tried it, and they are not itching to try it either. Most people are selfish. But the reason it is more blessed to give than receive is because we were made to give. Jesus gave Himself for us and we should give to others. If we give to others we will see what real life is all about. Sixth, there is something beyond the grave for us if we live by the Spirit. Jesus said, "store up for yourselves treasure in heaven." Paul said, "Run so as to win the prize." James said, "Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial, for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life." There are rewards/possessions that we will receive in heaven to be used on earth during the kingdom and forevermore when we live by the Spirit. The great thing about these possessions is they can never be lost or destroyed. They are like gold, silver and precious stones that will belong to us forever. Seventh, don't be sucked into the vortex of this world that says work, work, work and earn, earn, earn as a status symbol. You don't need all that and it doesn't mean anything and it's not the route to satisfaction and it can't be taken with you when you die and whoever gets it might turn out to be a moron. So invest in God, your family, your Church family, your friends and your community and make a difference in people's lives living by grace.

¹ Donald R. Glenn, "Ecclesiastes," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 988.

² Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Satisfied*, "Be" Commentary Series (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 68.

³ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Satisfied*, "Be" Commentary Series (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 69.