



LESSON 6 | HUMILITY & CONTENTMENT (5:1-20)

In Ecclesiastes 5, we enter into a new phase of the Teacher's writing. The earlier part of Ecclesiastes was written in mainly descriptive language. With chapter five, the Teacher begins using direct commands and appeals to action. This shows a move from reflection on how life was, to the ethics of how one should live. The beginning place of this section is the instruction to live one's life right before God (5:1-7).

Later in our passage the Teacher returns to his theme of meaninglessness, exploring the vanity of wealth and honor. People are to find the limit between contentment and greed. In 5:8-12, he writes of those who cannot be "satisfied with money." In 5:13-17 the Teacher explores the evil of those who cannot enjoy what they have; instead, "throughout their lives, they live under a cloud—frustrated, discouraged, and angry" (5:17).

In 5:18-19 the Teacher describes human life as a lot given by God, along with the wealth, possessions, and power to enjoy them. This sets up 5:20 as the key focus verse. Those who acknowledge all of life as a gift from God "seldom reflect on the days of their life, because God keeps them occupied with gladness of heart." The passage is not stating that one who has much does not remember or think of his days. Rather, those who see all of life as a gift from God do not spend too much energy dwelling on the past or the future because they appreciate where God has placed them in the present!

Approaching God with Humility (5:1-7)!

This section on public worship has much to teach us. Worship has to do with God, but we have a constant tendency to shift the focus elsewhere, for example, entertainment, one another, or ourselves. In his critique of being quick to speak and his example of making a vow but not fulfilling it, the Teacher is in line with much prophetic critique of Israelite religion. Word and deed must go together, otherwise worship becomes empty.

The Teacher wants to hold his readers accountable for their worship, to ensure that they understand what they are involved in, and to act accordingly. The particular temptation the Teacher addresses is a careless approach to God and the use of many words, somehow thinking that this will satisfy God without accompanying action. Once reverence for God is lost, other things move into the center of our focus and the danger of idolatry is never far away.

Taking God seriously as God will mean that we engage with God personally—that, after all, is what worship is about. As the Teacher says, however, we will focus on listening to God and be slow to speak many words, especially vows. James 1:19–20 could well be a reflection on this section in. James exhorts his readers to be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger, for one's anger does not produce God's righteousness.

¹ Craig Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes* (210-15)

For Christians living between the coming of the kingdom in Jesus and its consummation, one way we hear God's address to us is in the Scriptures. In a day of many words it is important to note that reading Scripture is not the same as listening to God. The intent in reading Scripture is to extend the range of our listening to the God who reveals himself in word, to become acquainted with the ways in which he has spoken in various times and places, along with the ways in which people respond when he speaks. A considerable effort is required nowadays to approach Scripture to listen. It involves recovering disciplines in which time is taken with Scripture to listen for God's word to us.

The Teacher and Jesus encourage us to be sparing in the words we use with God. In the context of taking oaths Jesus tells us, "Let your word be 'Yes, Yes,' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one" (Matt 5:37). It is intriguing that with regard to prayer the desert fathers also advise that we nurture our communion with the Father with short prayers: Abba Macarius was once asked 'How should one pray?' "He replied, 'There is no need at all to make long discourses; it is enough to stretch out one's hand and say, "Lord, as you will and as you know, have mercy." And if the conflict grows fiercer say: "Lord, help." He knows very well what we need and he shows us his mercy.'"

Then there is the marvelous Tolstoy story about three Russian monks on an island. The bishop visits them, and he is disturbed to discover that they do not know the Lord's Prayer. He devotes all his time to instructing them in the the Lord's Prayer. When he is leaving in his boat he sees the monks running across the water toward the boat. "Father," they say, "we can't remember the the Lord's Prayer." Amazed he asks, "Well, how do you normally pray?" "Well," they say, "'Dear God, there are three of you, and there are three of us, have mercy on us!'" The bishop is struck by their simplicity and holiness and tells them to return and be at peace.

Anne Lamott, in her book *Traveling Mercies*, says that she and her friends, as busy, stressed-out moms, find that there are two prayers they pray continually: "*Help me, help me, help me,*" and "*Thank you, thank you, thank you*"! The point is that communion facilitated by prayer from the heart requires fewer, not more, words. Words facilitate communion, but in a cerebral culture sometimes we use words to do too much.

Words have their place, but so too do silence, resting, and waiting. The essence of worship is our devotion to God, and the Teacher's short section is helpful in reorienting us in this respect.

Meaningless Wealth vs. The Gifts of Contentment and Joy²

In 5:8-17 the Teacher describes the oppression of the poor and explores the problems encountered in the love of money and wealth. With regard to oppression, recall what the Teacher first said in 4:1-3. The Teacher's additional insight here is how power can become corrupt and how this corruption can spread like cancer through the entire structure of authority and devastate the poor.

Government, as the Teacher notes, is a good institution designed to facilitate justice for all. By design government wields power, and ideally this is to be for the benefit of all citizens (cf. Rom. 13:1-7). But from his observations, the Teacher knows that corruption can set in so that rather than promoting justice, government becomes the source of oppression and exploitation of the poor.

In 5:10-17, the Teacher reflects on the love of wealth and its dangers. He says the love of money and the work for it will not bring fulfillment. It is important to emphasize here that the Teacher is referring not simply

² Craig Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes* (222-27)

to wealth per se but *the love of it*. As Paul says in 1 Tim. 6:10, “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.”

The Teacher elaborates on the type of grief that love of money can lead to. It never satisfies, because one always wants more; increasing wealth brings more stress into one's life so that one is unable to really enjoy it; and if one's identity is formed around wealth, then when it is taken away (v. 14), one's life becomes empty and meaningless. Furthermore, one cannot take one's wealth along at death.

By contrast, in 5:18-20 the Teacher presents a vision of eating and drinking, of enjoying one's work and one's wealth, and of sustaining joy. There is a remarkable shift in tone here from the pessimism of vv. 8-17 to these verses. The context of this *carpe diem* passage is that the love of wealth does not satisfy or last and may be lost more quickly than it is gained. The Teacher's focus is on what he as a believer understands to be good and fitting—it represents a different perspective on life that he also knows to be true.

Verses 18–20 conjure up a marvelous vision of what life could be and should be: eating and drinking and enjoying one's labor. “God” occurs four times, and all the goodness is twice declared to be his gift. Verse 19 notes that everyone to whom God gives riches and wealth he empowers to “eat of it” and to rejoice in one's labor.

To be sure, wealth by itself is not the problem, but *where it fits in one's approach to life*. Contemporary studies show that after a certain level of wealth, there is no relationship between increased wealth and happiness. The Teacher perceptively analyzes just how destructive the love of wealth can be in a person's life. In our culture of relentless consumerism, love of wealth is a constant temptation. As Susan White notes,

If there is an overarching metanarrative that purports to explain reality in the late 20th century, it is surely that of the free-market economy. At the beginning of this narrative is the self-made, self-sufficient human being. At the end of this narrative is the big house, the big car, and the expensive clothes. In the middle is the struggle for success, the greed, the getting-and-spending in a world in which there is no such thing as a free lunch. Most of us have made this so thoroughly “our story” that we are hardly aware of its influence.

In our world today, the love of money is commonly regarded as *the* goal to be pursued. But, as the Teacher rightly observes, it is not the answer to life and can bring its own share of grief. Instead, the Teacher's focus is on joy and contentment. Joy occurs in 2:24-25 and in 3:22, but 5:20 evokes a sense of contentment and peace unparalleled in the earlier passages. This experience enables us to know there is a sense of it even if we cannot grasp it. The joy of the heart must be something like divine revelation. When we experience joy at least in one small moment, we come in touch with that sense of things which normally God alone sees.

Where the love of God is firm, full enjoyment of the creation is possible and desirable: one is “completely in the arms of God and completely in the world.” The capacity for joy amid pain points toward a solution for the Teacher's struggle, but he is not yet there in his journey. His affirmation of joy and celebration of life and its gifts as a gift from God does, however, resonate with Scripture as a whole.

REFLECTIONS & CONNECTIONS TO JESUS³

Not surprisingly, the fulfillment of salvation in Jesus is surrounded with joy. Luke in particular emphasizes this theme, and it is embodied early in his Gospel in the Magnificat, in which Mary rejoices in God (Luke 1:46–55). The theme of the messianic banquet, drawing on Deuteronomy, Ecclesiastes, and Isaiah, overflows with abundance and joy. A striking image of this is **the feasting and joy when the prodigal son returns home** (Luke 15:11–32).

In continuity with the Gospels, the Epistles call disciples to **follow Jesus with joy**. This is a major theme in Philippians, in which Paul calls on his readers to “rejoice, . . . and again I say, rejoice!” (4:4; cf. 1:18–19; 2:17–18; 3:1). Similarly in 1 Peter, Peter exhorts his readers to rejoice amid their trials—though they have not seen Christ, they “rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy” (1 Pet. 1:8). Revelation 19:7 brings the theme full circle with its exhortation to rejoice because the marriage supper of the Lamb has come. These biblical links help us to see that what the Teacher has in mind in the *carpe diem* passages is life as God intended it.

Regarding the Teacher’s observations on the futility of wealth, on many occasions Jesus warned against pursuing wealth. He said, “No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth” (Matt 6:24).

Jesus warned his disciples, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” To underscore his point, Jesus told them the parable of the rich fool who built bigger barns to store all his grain and his goods (Luke 12:15–21).

In addition, Jesus taught his followers that they need not worry about food and drink. He pointed out that “it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things.” Instead of striving for food and drink, Jesus assured his followers: “Indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matt 6:32–33). The implication is that instead of worrying about food and drink, we should rely on God and enjoy his good gifts every day.

The final verses of Ecclesiastes 5 speak to this kind of reliance on God, which brings contentment and joy. The Teacher, moreover, makes clear that God is both the giver and sustainer of these gifts. Derek Kidner writes, “At first sight this [passage] may look like the mere praise of simplicity and moderation; but in fact the key word is God, and the secret of life held out to us is openness to him: a readiness to take what comes to us as heaven-sent, whether it is toil or wealth or both.”

It is indeed remarkable that in a brief collection of sentences the Teacher mentions God four times and places these at the heart of the passage: “the few days of the life God gives us” (5:18); “God gives wealth and possessions and . . . enables [us] to enjoy them . . . this is the gift of God” (5:19); “God keeps them occupied with the joy of their hearts” (5:20).

It is clear that this passage centers on God: the sovereign God gives us our life, our wealth and possessions, and the ability to enjoy them. The Teacher emphasizes that God is the great Giver by repeating in 5:19, “this is the gift of God.” God is good: he keeps people “occupied with the joy of their hearts” (5:20).

³ Excerpted from Derek Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes* (58–60)

DISCUSSION

1. Our text begins by telling us to “keep watch” or “guard” our steps when we go to public worship. Is this something that you have thought much about? How would you describe your typical mindset as you prepare to worship with your Brentwood Hills family?
2. Why do you think there is so much emphasis in this text on our speech? What do our words reveal about us? In what situations might we be at risk of being quick with our mouths and hasty in heart before God?
3. If we were to be a people who remember that “God is in heaven and you are on earth” (v. 2), how might that inform the way we live our lives in our city? In other words, Monday through Friday, what changes in the way we work and treat people when we remember this?
4. In 5:10 the Teacher writes, “Whoever loves money never has enough.” John D. Rockefeller was once asked, “How much money is enough?” He famously answered, “Just a little bit more.”
 - ➡ In life “under the sun” can a person ever have enough wealth and possessions?
 - ➡ Over the course of your life, how has your walk with Jesus shaped your perspective on wealth (and what changed)? How much wealth is enough?
5. Read 5:13-18. In his sermon “Treasure vs. Money” Tim Keller lists three ways the pursuit of wealth can become greed. (1) Taking a job solely on the money to be made or status it provides; (2) Choosing to ignore unethical/dishonest practices; (3) Not questioning lifestyle choices (i.e. do I really need to spend that much money?)
 - ➡ Do you agree with him? Why or why not?
 - ➡ Consider the observations that the Teacher makes in vv. 13-17. How have you witnessed similar things in your life? Name other ways you think the pursuit of wealth can be detrimental.
6. In 5:18-20, the Teacher changes his perspective and gives us a balanced, God-centered view of wealth. What profound insight does he give us about how we can develop a balanced, God-glorifying view of our earthly possessions? Have you found this perspective in your life? Describe how God keeps you occupied with his joy in your heart (v. 20).