



LESSON 7 | A HEART TO HEART (6:1-7:14)

Wealth, pleasure, wisdom, work, power... It's so easy to fall into a life pursuing these things as a source of meaning, but the Teacher has shown us time and time again that, while all these things have meaning in and of themselves, they become meaningless when the person who possesses them pursues them outside of their appointed purpose. In Ecclesiastes 5, the Teacher observes that the love of money does not answer the question of what life is about. In 6:1-12, his central concern is that acquisition of wealth does not by itself satisfy and bring the rest that meaningful life requires.

As we move in chapter 7, we also begin to see a shift. All of a sudden, instead of looking only at the things “under the sun,” we begin to work our way towards the ultimate conclusion that the Teacher is guiding us to at the conclusion of the book, and with that change of theme comes a new dose of optimism. The Teacher begins the second half of this book with a heart-to-heart conversation with us. He passes on deep wisdom that comes from a hard-lived and hard-learned life: We learn more from death than life, and more from living in the present than living in the past.

Enjoy the Blessings of Life & Accept Its Limitations (6:1-12)¹

To open this chapter, the Teacher discusses the three measuring sticks of success in Hebrew society: wealth, long life, and lots of children. However, as wonderful as these good gifts are, unless God is present in them, we cannot truly enjoy them. The “evil” that the Teacher speaks of in 6:1-2 refers to the painful misfortune of not being able to enjoy God’s good gifts. In 6:3-6, the Teacher uses two illustrations to emphasize his point about the vanity of money and pleasure apart from God.

In 6:7-12, the Teacher reminds us that life has its challenges and we must accept this reality. In 6:7-9, he provides three proverbial summaries of the meaninglessness of life. While the immediate reference is to food (6:7), the Teacher’s intention seems to speak to anything material. Whatever it is that you pick to attempt to satisfy your soul apart from God will eventually be found lacking. Or to put it another way, stuff doesn’t satisfy.

What are we to make of the Teacher’s exploration of wealth and possessions? This is a large topic, and one would ultimately need to examine the whole of Scripture, which we cannot do here. The Teacher does, however, offer some very important insights on this topic. We need to remember, first, that this exploration, as with all the others, operates under the rubric of what the Teacher said in Ecclesiastes 1:3. **The Teacher wants to know what work and life are all about, and wealth is one of the areas he examines in this respect.**

¹ Excerpted from Craig Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes* (240-44)

We also should note the contemporary relevance of the Teacher's exploration of wealth. The accumulation of wealth is one of the great idols of our day, and huge amounts of energy are spent seeking meaning through greater and greater accumulation of wealth and possessions. **The Teacher's question is whether wealth can ultimately provide us with meaning and purpose. His answer is a decisive *no*.** In terms of his search this still leaves him perplexed about wealth, but his reasons for replying in the negative are insightful:

First there is the problem of motivation: the love of money will not lead to satisfaction in life. Humans easily become attached to goods in a way that replaces the Creator with his gifts, and such idolatry will never lead to fulfillment in life, for we are made first for God, and the creation can be properly enjoyed *only* as God's gift.

Second, there is the effect that possessions can have on a person. In chap. 6 the Teacher gets at the effect of the love of money on a person: one is unable to find the rest and meaning one so desires. The Teacher never explicitly explains why God does not empower this person to enjoy his wealth, **but the reference to "rest" as the missing element (6:5, 7)**, with its allusions to the problem of work since the fall, provides an important clue. Since the fall, work is not easily integrated into life so that one works and then rests as does God in Genesis 1:1–2:3. Work is a struggle and easily becomes an idol. Pursuit of wealth and honor above all things boomerangs back on the person and leaves one restless and unfulfilled. As the Genesis narrative makes clear, the lack of rest in work is integrally connected to a broken relationship with God.

One could argue that at the heart of our attachment to "things" — and the problems that come from it — is our need for security and the question of trust: In what or whom do we place our confidence? To say that our life consists *not* in what we possess *but in* our relationship to God, *not* in the goods we have compared with what others have *but in* the affirming verdict of God upon our lives, is not to say that the things of this world are of no importance. But it does make the issue of trust central to our lives.

That creation is fallen will always make trust in possessions rather than the Creator a temptation. This is at the heart of what makes those who pursue wealth above all unable to find rest. Hence Christians should be ready to renounce the gifts, bearing in mind that the problem is not the gifts but in the "greedy, grasping, fallen self." This is particularly true in our materialistic age. **The issue with possessions is ultimately an issue of trust.** With this, no doubt, the Teacher would concur. As he concludes in 5:1-7: "Instead, fear God."

Knowing What Is Good (7:1-13)²

The list of proverbs in 7:1-13 indicates a change in literary style and thus a new section. However, this section attempts to answer the question raised in the conclusion of 6:12: "***Who knows what is good for a person during the few and meaningless days of one's life?***" In this section, the Teacher shares several ways of the wise for today and every day.

1. Seek To Do the Right Thing Everyday (7:1a)

The Teacher begins in the first verse by telling us that what people think of you — a reflection of the type of person you are — is better than "fine perfume" (looking good, or giving off an overall appearance of being good). Essentially, he reminds us that external beauty is nothing compared to what lies inside, a truth that God recognizes (see 1 Samuel 16:7). Our reputation is built over time and can be lost at anytime. Therefore, just like a wall is built by stacking one brick at a time, so too our reputation is built by doing the right thing one day at a time as best we can by what we know.

² Excerpted from David Tate, "Ecclesiastes 7" and David Gibson "Living Life Backwards"

2. Live Every Day for One Day (7:1b-2)

The average person has about 27,000 days to live their life on the earth. After that, our opportunities to learn, love, and leave an impact are gone. It's so easy to waste our life one hour and day at a time, so it is wise to start with the end in mind and work backward. Just as we plug a final destination into our navigation so that we are directed purposefully toward a desired end, so too is thinking about our last day helpful and clarifying.

What do you want your last day to be like? What do you want people at your funeral to say? What difference do you want to leave after you are gone? The Teacher says that the house of mourning will help you grow more than a house of feasting. Though the feast may be more enjoyable, the house of mourning puts your mind in perspective and grounds you in the reality of earthly life and its temporary nature.

3. Learn to Lament (7:3-4)

In our culture, we celebrate our wins publicly, and mourn our losses privately. This can lead to isolation and also accounts for a very lonely condition in a world. Yet throughout Scripture, lamenting is part of the public life of a person. The way of life in the Teacher's culture included a public way of mourning for a period of time for people to express their grief. In today's isolated Western culture, things are not this way, and social media increases the pressure to maintain a façade that "all is well and we are doing well." Conversely, in the Bible we have an entire book called Lamentations, a majority of the Psalms that are laments, and large sections of other books (especially in the prophets) are laments. Even Jesus lamented over Jerusalem and wept at the death of his friend Lazarus.

Sorrow lets us work through our grief. It allows us stop pretending that all is well. And it welcomes others into that grief, a space where friendships are often forged. The wise understand these truths and thus open their minds to the sufferings of this world, whereas those who are foolish try to escape suffering by acting as if it is avoidable, distracting their minds with the pleasures of this world.

4. Keep One Ear Open and One Ear Closed (7:5-6)

The Teacher rightly reminds us that both wise and foolish people are happy to tell us what they think. But, if we want good for our lives, we have to have one closed ear turned toward the fools, and one open ear turned toward the wise. It is better to meditate on the words of a wise person and thus be rebuked for your own actions than to take joy in the "song of fools," who praise themselves and the world for things that have no meaning. "The laughter of the fools" is a sign that they are ignorant to the truth, lost in their own ways of thinking that tell them that pleasure gives meaning. Yet this too, the Teacher says, is meaningless.

5. Shortcuts Are Dead Ends (7:7)

In life, when money is short and deadlines are tight, it can be tempting to cut corners, take a shortcut, and do things that are unethical if not illegal. A bribe is when we decide how much we are willing to sell our integrity for. When we take a bribe, it reveals that we are lovers of money, which means at the bedrock of our soul is not a love of God and worship of God. In this way, money is a good way to gauge our soul. These "shortcuts" ultimately prove to be dead ends in God's economy.

These shortcuts can include fudging on our billable hours, over-billing, increasing our profit margins on an item, stealing from our employer (including time), and covering for others who are taking what is not theirs. We can make a lot of excuses for why we take what is not ours, but all such dealings "corrupt the heart." Since the heart is the seat and center of our lives from which all of life flows, poisoning our soul for a few bucks is never a good return on investment in the eternal economy of God

6. Make the Last Day the Best Day (7:8)

A proud person has a good start. A patient person has a good finish. Though we typically think short term, we should look to end goals, for that is where the fruit can be gathered; patience until the end is better than the pride that comes through initiation (a proverb that is especially applicable in the culture we live in nowadays).

Even Ahab had enough sense to point out the same thing, saying in 1 Kings 20:11, “A warrior putting on his sword for battle should not boast like a warrior who has already won.” If you do something, you don’t have to say anything because the results speak for themselves.

7. Control Your Temper (7:9)

Being quickly angered reflects one’s foolishness by displaying that they feel threatened by the things of this world, which ultimately cannot harm them. However, the wise show a patient heart or attitude by not being easily provoked or rushing to respond. They are “cool in spirit” (Prov 17:27) and exercise patience and self-control by sometimes holding back their thoughts instead of speaking (Prov 10:14). Their gentle speech can extinguish anger and resentment (Prov 15:1).

8. You Can’t Move Forward Looking Backward (7:10)

One of the first things you’re told when you learn to drive is that if you want to go forward you have to look forward, and if you want to go backward you have to turn your head around and look backward (or at least look at a screen to see where the car is moving in reverse). You can’t go forward while you look backward. The Teacher says it is better to live in the present than to dwell on the past, for in dwelling on the past, we fail to appreciate what is given by envying what we have had in the past. This, the Teacher says, is foolishness.

9. Wisdom Is Wonderful (7:11-12)

To navigate the rough seas of life, two oars are particularly good to have in the boat – wealth and wisdom. Wealth can be a very good and helpful thing, as money can make some of life’s pains and problems go away. But, as the Teacher says, wisdom is even more valuable than wealth. In fact, wisdom can save your life. Unlike knowledge, which tells us what is true, wisdom also tells us what to do with that knowledge. Wisdom does not guarantee the absence of hardship in life, but it does guarantee a course through the hardship of this life.

One of the biggest takeaways of these proverbs comes in v.11 with the phrase “see the sun.” With this verse we see the shift that takes place between chap. 6 and 7. Whereas ch. 1-6 dealt with the meaningless of things “under the sun” (life apart from God), the Teacher will now point us in ch. 7-12 toward finding out ultimate meaning in things *in the sun* (or *life with God*). The Teacher is telling us that the benefits of wisdom might be unapparent to the unbeliever, but to those who “see the sun” the benefit is loud and clear. Wisdom helps us realize our need for God as we see that the world has nothing lasting to offer us.

10. Consider What God Has Done (7:13-14)

To further this point, we reach a juxtaposition of a phrase we heard in the very first chapter of Ecclesiastes. In 1:15, we read that “what is crooked cannot be straightened,” yet in 7:13 the Teacher takes this comment and rewords it as a question: “Who can straighten what [God] has made crooked?” This reminds us of what God has done for us. With this transition, Ecclesiastes 7 is a contrast to chap. 1 by taking the ultimately hopeless topic of seeing things “under the sun” by providing us with the hope that comes through things *in the sun*.

Finally, in v.14, the Teacher points out that it isn’t hard to be happy when life is easy, but we so easily succumb to sadness when life is difficult. The Teacher makes the case for optimism here, proving that

optimism and realism should perhaps be one and the same: God is present in both good times and challenging times, and since God loves us and knows what is best *for* us, should we not accept both the good and bad with thankful hearts? This reflects on chap. 6 as much as it does on the book of Job: “Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?” (Job 2:10). Be grateful for the struggles in life – the negative things – just as much as the positive.

This is what faith looks like in the midst of our pain and struggle. We do not see what God is doing, but we turn to God and trust as we continue forward. This eventually leads to our faith becoming sight, because in time, whether during this life or in the kingdom, we see what God was doing from beginning to end.

DISCUSSION

1. Given the busy lives that each of us lead, it can be a rare thing for us to sit down and think about our lives on a deeper level (either by ourselves or with a group) – asking questions such as: Why do I do what I do? What are the desires that I am ultimately hoping to satisfy? Are the choices I’m making on a daily basis achieving the outcomes that I truly want to achieve?
 - ➔ Discuss as a group why you think that’s so rare for us to do. What keeps us from asking these kinds of questions? What might be the result if we asked these kinds of deeper questions more often?
2. Think of the happiest, most content person you have ever known. What was the source of their happiness? Were they very wealthy? Did they have a prestigious job and work constantly? Were they in a position of power and authority over others? Or was the source of their happiness something else?
3. Ecclesiastes 6:7 says that *“Everyone’s work is for their mouth, and yet their appetite is never satisfied.”* The teacher suggests that we work to feed and clothe ourselves, but if this is our end goal, work will not satisfy our soul. Apart from God, why does work (and what we gain from it) fail to bring us the ultimate fulfillment that we long for?
4. Compare Proverbs 22:1 with Ecclesiastes 7:1. If you could choose a good name (reputation) or riches, which would you choose? Why?
5. In 7:1-4 the Teacher begins to drive home one of the main ideas of Ecclesiastes—to live your life in light of your last days.
 - ➔ Why does the Teacher say that it’s better to mourn than to feast? Do we agree? Why is a funeral seen as a better place to grow in wisdom and to think about our life than a feast or a party?
 - ➔ What might it look like for us as a community of faith to reflect on our own mortality together? How does (or how should) having a good understanding of our mortality impact the way we live today?
6. Why are we not to remember fondly “the good ole days” (7:10)? What does this nostalgia take from us?
7. What advice does the Teacher give in 7:14? While it may be easy to see God in good times, how have you experienced God’s abiding presence in the midst of challenging times? How has this strengthened your faith?