

Greed and God Ecclesiastes 5:8-6:9

If you're new, we're studying Ecclesiastes. We've considered various topics related to life under the sun – life in a fallen and frustrating world.

- **We had a brief stop at the “church under the sun” last week, and now we are outside the gathering in everyday life once again...**
- **How do we maintain a sense of God's greatness the rest of the week?**
- **Students would often ask this question the last day of camp... how do I stay close to God?**
- **We've looked at some of those answers: companionship for example. But here is another text that's helpful:**

**We must treasure God in the little things,
and be quick to detect and destroy greed in our hearts.**

- **God not only meets us in his house; he also meets us in his world.**
- **But we need eyes to see and hearts to delight in the gifts he provides.**
- **He meets us in the ordinary: chores, homework, the gym, job, dinner table.**

It has been a long time since I've read Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, but it was brought to my attention this week.

- **In one particular tale, The Pardoner (Preacher) tells a story of three lawless who men go in search of Death.**
- **They think if they can find Death that they will be able to kill him.**
- **So an old man tells them that Death is found at the foot of an oak tree.**
- **But instead of finding death, to their great delight they find eight bushels of gold!**
- **They decide to stay there for the night, and then leave the next morning with their treasure. But then, the youngest of the three men decides to go to town to get food and drink, but he also buys some rat poison – in order to kill the other two guys and take all the treasure himself.**
- **What the young man doesn't know is that the other two guys are plotting his death too!**
- **When the young man returns from town, the other two men stab him to death.**
- **Then to celebrate the other two lift up their glasses to toast their victory, only to drink poisoned wine.**
- **They too die. The old man was right: Death was found under the tree! (O'Donnell)**
- **Like that tale, the Preacher in Ecclesiastes **explains the dark side of riches.****
- **The difference in Chaucer's tale and Ecclesiastes is that the Pardoner admits his dirty little secret that he preached on money for his own gain; but this text is given for our good.**
- **What many people find in the greedy pursuit of more and more, is despair, dissatisfaction and destruction.**

One of the primary words in this section is the word “consume” (5:11, 12, 17, 18, 19, 6:2 – consume, eat, enjoy). What is it that you are pursuing for satisfaction?

The good life involves enjoying God's grace; not seeking to get more and more stuff.

To qualify, money has **great advantages and it can be a tremendous blessing.**

These categories are important:

- **Unrighteous Poor**
- **Righteous Poor**
- **Unrighteous Rich**
- **Righteous Rich**

So the point is not “we must all be poor,” but we must all seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness”; we must all seek to be “rich toward God.”

- **Israel** is warned that when they enter the Promised Land – a land of abundance – that they may forget God:
¹⁴ then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.... ¹⁷ Beware lest you say in your heart, ‘My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.’ ¹⁸ You shall remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your fathers, as it is this day.
- Likewise, **Proverbs** underscores the blessing of material abundance, but also the dangers of it. **Prov 30**:
⁸ Remove far from me falsehood and lying;
give me neither poverty nor riches;
feed me with the food that is needful for me,
⁹ lest I be full and deny you
and say, “Who is the LORD?”
or lest I be poor and steal
and profane the name of my God.
- **Jesus** warns about the dangers of wealth (Matt 6:19-21; Lk 16:19-21).
- “The cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things” chokes the word” (Mark 4:19)

So the Bible is full of warnings about the **dangers of a materialistic lifestyle**; and the NT places the warnings more on the **eternal ramifications** of such a life.

Both the OT/NT describe how greed is not only **self-destructive, but it also hurts others.**

- **Paul’s** words captures the thrust of Ecclesiastes 5-6 ...
1 Timothy 6
⁶ But **godliness with contentment** is **great gain**, ⁷ for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. ⁸ But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be **content**. ⁹ But those who **desire to be rich** fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into **ruin and destruction**. ¹⁰ For **the love of money** is a root of **all kinds of evils**. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.
- Solomon like, Paul in 1 Tim 6, describes how it is the **love** of money that is a root of “all kinds of evil.” Not **money (in and of itself; there are a lot of wealthy people in the Bible who do great good for the kingdom)**; it’s the **excessive love of it** that’s the problem.
- “He who loves money will not be satisfied with money.” (5:10)

- The excessive love of it – the desire for more, is **destructive**.
- What is gain is **godly contentment**.

Structure

Some scholars have suggested that we have a *chiasm* in this passage.

- The ends correspond to each other – having similar themes. (5:8-12/6:7-9)
- The interior sections, moving closer to the middle, correspond. (5:13-17/6:3-6)
- The middle is the central point – like a bulls eye: the secret to joy (5:18-20).

The ends and the interior sections speak about the dissatisfaction, despair, and darkness that those who love money experience; the solution is in the middle: enjoy God.

I want to do is work through the whole passage, highlighting the various problems associated with the love of money, and **then come back to this central paragraph** and consider the solution. **(1) The Problems of Greed, and (2) The Pleasures of God.**

What this text **helps us do is destroy this idol** of covetousness.

Paul says “Greed is idolatry” (3:5).

We need to see it for what it is, and avoid it; and seek our God who satisfies the longing of our souls.

The Problems of Greed (5:8-17; 6:1-9)

Here we see why you should avoid the love of money; why you shouldn’t chase the wind... He gives at least **eight** reasons!

1. Oppression (5:8-9)

The basic idea is that *greedy people hurt people; here, greedy officials*.

- Solomon deals with greed on a systemic level first.
- He says **unjust oppression of the poor is often caused by a bureaucratic hierarchy that is motivated by greed.** (cf, James 5:1-6)
- Instead of serving for the good of the citizens, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.

8a: Solomon says “**don’t be amazed by this**” – this fallen world involves a lot of oppression (as we have already seen in the book).

- He calls it a “**violation of justice and righteousness**” (v. 8).
- It’s hard to know exactly what he has in mind, but we should grieve over broken systems that trample on the poor, and do what we can to promote economic justice.

8b: The successive tiers of bureaucracy results in officials “**watching**” out for each other.

- Sometimes such watching enables proper checks and balances.
- But in corrupt governments, it involves corruption and mutual protection.

9b: The corruption reaches to the very top: the king is participating in profiting from the fields.

- This verse is syntactically awkward, but the idea is that the only one who benefits from the work in the fields is the king.

Many rulers in the ancient world took advantage of the citizens.

- **Naboth's Vineyard** is a classic example of a King taking advantage of another. (1 Kings 21; cf., 1 Sam 8:10-18)

2. Dissatisfaction (5:10-11)

Now, he moves to a personal level: public leaders aren't the only one's guilty of loving money too much! It's a temptation for everyone!

10: The love of money leaves you empty.

- Greed will not lead to gratification.
- Money cannot buy joy, just as it cannot buy love.
- Those who love money, **always want more!**
- When someone asked Rockefeller how much money was enough, he said, "Just a little bit more."
- That's very Ecclesiastes.
- Wealth is very **addictive**.
- Someone wins the jackpot in Vegas and what do they do? Stop!? No! They play another round!

11: There is little satisfaction for those who always want more, for various reasons, and one of them is this: the more you have, the more people will come after it!

"they increase who eat them" refers to people who **devour** one's wealth.

- Maybe the **government** in the form of taxes.
- Maybe **family** and **friends**.
- Maybe those who coming **begging** for a handout.
- If you have it all, you will need a **host of workers: maids, grounds crew, cooks, accountants**
- Akin: One tragic story ... Kosar made tens of millions of dollars in his playing career. And he also made at least that much, if not more, as a businessman after his playing days. **And yet, he had to file for bankruptcy. A reporter asked him about this, and he revealed that there was a time in his life when he was paying 60 cell phone plans. He told the reporter that he only used one cell phone, but he was paying for 60 plans (Brennan, "Athletes").** In addition to this, an ex-wife, attorneys, the IRS, former teammates who needed thousands to get out of debt, the economic recession, and foolish financial advisors mooched millions off of him.
- **Everyone had their hand out, and he didn't manage things wisely**

"what advantage has their owner but to see them with his eyes?"

- **None. He sees them briefly and their gone.**
- All he can do is feast his eyes on them before they disappear into someone else's hands.

3. Restlessness (5:11-12)

12: The love of money will rob you of sleep.

- The sleep of the honest worker is sweet (12a).
 - This person is not driven by greed.
 - This person is not tossing and turning all night thinking about lawsuits, financial crashes, employees, profits/losses, etc.
- But the greedy can't sleep (12b).
- Those who are all about advancement and wealth often say, "You can sleep when you are dead" – and the tragedy is, they're not ready to meet God when they die.
 - It's a double tragedy.
- Better to have that "one hand of quietness" (4:6), knowing God, than chasing the wind and dying apart from him.

4. Loss (5:13-14)

- Some of you have read, *When Helping Hurts*; here is another title waiting to be written, *When Hoarding Hurts*.
- He adds to the list of why you shouldn't chase after more and more: you will hurt yourself!
- Riches held back hurts the owner.
- He says that grief and pain are experienced by the hoarder *specifically* when a bad investment is made.
 - **Statistics say that within 2 years of leaving professional football, 78% players are bankrupt or are in financial distress (Akin)**
- Solomon's illustration is about someone who has hoarded wealth only to lose it through a disaster or a poor investment.
- The father now has nothing to pass on to his son.
- Qoheleth calls it "a sickening tragedy" ("grievous evil").

The Bible doesn't call us to hoard; nor to make foolish investments; but to be generous and to invest in the kingdom.

- One of the ways we break the power of greed is by giving; investing in the kingdom is always a good investment!

5. Death (5:15).

- Only as long as one lives, can one receive enjoyment from possessions.
- Both Job (1:21) and Paul (1 Tim 6:7) quote this.
- You can't take it with you.
- **It's like Monopoly – sooner or later, it goes back into the box.**
- **Like the country song "Trailer Hitch"**
 - I don't know why, know why*
 - Everybody wanna die rich*
 - Diamonds, Champagne,*
 - Work your way down that list.*
 - We try, everybody tries*
 - Tries to fit into that ditch*
 - You can't take it with you when you go*

Never seen a hearse with a trailer hitch

Never seen a hearse with a trailer hitch.

- **Jesus calls this foolish in Luke 12.**
- **Steve Jobs (1955–2011) had a net worth of \$10.2 billion when he died, but he – like us! – we leave the world the same way we came in: with nothing.**

6. Misery (5:16-17)

16: Again, he states that the insatiable desire of the greedy is a grievous evil.

- This person is never content: they are “toiling for the wind.”

17: Consequently, their “**eat in darkness,**” and have much “**vexation, sickness, and anger.**”

- “**vexation**” – they are irritated/frustrated often.
- “**Darkness**” – Gloom, joyless existence.
- **Without God’s grace to enjoy abundance, everything that money brings is joyless.**

The Solution (5:18-20) – More on this in a moment.

- What a contrast!
- We move from **destruction, dissatisfaction, disappointment, death, darkness to the means of delight.**

7. Discontentment (6:1-6)

6:1-9 further describes what has already been said, with 1-6 describing **the person who has everything yet possesses nothing.**

- What do you think you need to be happy?
- Wealth, children, family, long life?
- All of that is present, but this person is discontent.

A. A Full Bank Account but Discontent (1-2)

1-2: He describes the depressing problem of being rich but **not able to enjoy things.**

- **Prosperity is not always as good as it appears!**
- **Just because you have stuff, doesn’t mean you have joy.**
- This man has everything but **joy.**
 - It’s another mystery for Solomon. He says, “Explain this!”
- He is **wealthy** and **famous** [“honor”], yet for some unstated reason, he has **no joy.**
- We aren’t told why the stranger enjoys it, just that he doesn’t enjoy it.
- **Ryken: “The gifts that God gives us and the power to enjoy those gifts come separately. This is why having more money can never guarantee that we will find any enjoyment. Without God, we will still be discontent. It is only when we keep him at the center of our existence that we experience real joy in the gifts that God may give. The fear of the Lord is not just the beginning of knowledge; it is also the source of satisfaction.”**
- **“Batteries Sold Separately” – this verse could be called “Joy Sold Separately”**
- **Joy is found in Christ – you can have that regardless of what you own!**
- **“As possessing nothing, yet having everything” – Paul.**
- **1K Phew, “I just want the Lamb You can have the Lamborghini.”**

B. A Full Quiver But Discontent (3-5)

3-6: This is one of those “better than” statements.

- Qoheleth bitterly concludes that the stillborn child is better off than the man who has everything but doesn't know the God of grace.
- His prosperity is figuratively stated as **having fathered a hundred sons and daughters**.
- But this rich man with a big family is unhappy; **we presume because he didn't have a relationship with God.**

3a: Notice that it was *his soul*, is dissatisfied (6:3).

- Something was missing in his life.

3b: When he died, **he didn't even receive a proper burial.**

- A sign in those days of being under God's curse.

3c: Next, he thinks about **non-existence; if he is so unhappy, maybe he would be better off never having lived at all.**

- He considers the stillborn child.

4: The child “comes in **vanity**” because its delivery is **ineffective** (6:4).

- It “goes in **darkness**” because it dies **before ever seeing the sunlight**.
- Even “**its name is covered in darkness**”—not because the child is never named by his or her parents, but because **death hides his or her identity and personality** (Ibid).
 - **No one gets to know the child at all. It's all so sad.**

5: **It has never seen the sun but it does have rest.**

- It doesn't have to endure the suffering of life.
- Best of all, I believe, he or she finds eternal rest with God.

The point here, though, is not to answer all of our questions related to this issue.

- **Nor is it to minimize the pain related to the stillborn child.**
- **The point is to emphasize, through this shocking comparison, the tragedy of a discontented life that is devoid of peace and joy. (Provan)**
- What is tragic, he says, is the person who lives life devoid of God – who has everything but possesses nothing.

C. A Full Life Span But Discontent (6:6)

- He also **lived for many years** – what everyone wants.
- **Two thousand years old (v. 6)!**
- **Yet that doesn't bring joy.**

6b: In the end, Solomon says, **we will all die.**

- The good news for the saint is **this life is not all there is!**
- **Our treasure is in heaven!**
- But the preacher doesn't go into that... But he does show **us our need for the gospel.**

- No matter how long we live or how much we have, it is all meaningless unless we can enjoy it, which we will never be able to do without God's power and grace.

8. Hunger (6:7-9)

6:7: Greed is compared to an appetite; you eat, but soon after, you're hungry again. Never satisfied.

6:8-9: What advantage has the poor man who knows how to meet life's challenges?

What is the profit of wisdom over folly?

- Verse 9 answers it: **It is in understanding that we should rest content with what God has given us and not wander off in endless pursuit of more**
- The wealthy fool fails to see the good before him ("the sight of the eyes")
- The wise pauper is content because he is not roving around trying to satisfying a greedy appetite for more and more.

Who is satisfied? **Those who seek the Lord.** They "lack no good thing" (Ps 34)

- "For he satisfies the longing soul, and the hungry he fills with good things" (Ps 107.9)
- "He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty." (Lk 1.53)
- "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be satisfied." (Matt 5:6).

It's not a secret. God has revealed it. Our hunger, our longing will only be filled and satisfied in knowing Jesus Christ.

The Pleasures of God (5:18-20)

Regarding the contented life, we have **another oasis in the desert! Recall Paul's words:**

¹⁷ As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. (1 Tim 6:17)

Do not put your hope in riches.

Put your hope in God, who is good; who provides us with everything for our enjoyment and his glory.

There was **no mention of God in 5:13-17**; it was life under the sun devoid of God.

- **But now, we find the person who has a relationship with God, who is enjoying life.**
- **Now he mentions God repeatedly.**

Enjoyment is therefore, **God-centered.**

- Without God, we find neither meaning nor joy.
- God is better than greed.
- If you know the God of grace, then you find meaning and joy and you can view possessions rightly, and use them to bless others immensely.
- **The ability to do this is a gift of God's grace** (notice the emphasis on what God "gives").

- Those who learn this godly contentment are free from preoccupation with the pain of mortality (5:18–20).

He repeats these three “little things” through which we enjoy God.

3 simple pleasures:

1. **Eating**
2. **Drinking**
3. **Working**

When you do that, time flies because you’re enjoying life.

18: To **eat and drink** here it is the **symbol of a contented and happy life.**

- In **1 Kings 4:20** the phrase describes the peaceful contentment of Solomon’s reign.
20 Judah and Israel were as many as the sand by the sea. They ate and drank and were happy.
- And it is a **micro picture** of what we will enjoy on the **macro level** when Christ returns.
- **To enjoy a good meal with great friends, family, neighbors is a gift of grace.**
- **Qoheleth wants you to enjoy your pancakes covered in maple syrup (or your kale smoothie with a side of quinoa);**
 - **to enjoy your chips and salsa;**
 - **to enjoy your morning workout;**
 - **to enjoy your ice cold cheerwine on a hot day;**
 - **to enjoy your wool socks on a cold day;**
 - **to enjoy your camping trip grilling burgers on a fire while you swap stories with your friends and family;**
 - **to make a toast to your friends with tears of joy for all that God has done, is doing, and promises to do**
 - **All of it rightly received with gratitude to God.**
- **We are to treasure God by enjoying his gifts.**
- Some envision Christianity being all about saying “no” to such things; it’s all about deny everything; that’s asceticism not Christianity...
- Such people remind me of **Lewis: “There is no good in trying to be more spiritual than God.”**
- While we must not be enslaved to anything, we are to enjoy these things to God’s glory, as gifts of God.

**God aims to be glorified both in creation and redemption;
and He created our tongues, tastebuds, and our digestive system
in infinite wisdom and amazing goodness.**

18-19: Toil can be enjoyable!

- We are made in God’s image, and God is a **worker!**
- So accept your lot (twice); find enjoyment in your work.
- Recognize the absolute sovereignty of God over all things; he who is the giver of all good things..

19: Not all wealth is bad.

- Here we see that **God blesses some with wealth and possessions and the power to enjoy it.**
- **God grants us the grace to not turn money and possessions into an idol.**
- **“This is God’s gift.”**

20: The life of the contented man will be so occupied with joy that the vanity of life will be virtually forgotten.

Rest, contentment and gratitude are not tied to how much you have.

It has to do with the kind of relationship with God you have.

The person who finds real joy is the person that knows the God of grace intimately.

This person treasures God not just on Sunday – in the gathering – but also everyday in God’s gifts.

Conclusion

God’s grace is seen in the gifts of creation.

His grace is most wonderful seen in the gift of redemption.

Our food is a gift of grace.

Our salvation is by grace – “it is the gift of God.”

By his grace, God sent forth his only Son to save us and satisfy us forever.

Christ truly and fully satisfies us.

The Christ who came and dined with sinners!

Christ came died for sinners – for greedy people who want more and more.

Christ makes greedy sinners (like Zaccheus! And us!) generous servants!

And one day, those who have been changed by Christ’s grace, will have a meal with Him!

This is a gift of God.

The question is this: Will you and I turn away from greed, and pursue the God who satisfies the longing of every hungry soul who turns to him”

Riches I heed not, nor man’s empty praise,

Thou mine inheritance, now and always:

Thou and Thou only, first in my heart,

High King of Heaven, my Treasure Thou Art.