



Ecclesiastes 5:8-6:12

The Seduction of Money

The painting at the top of this paper is a famous portrait by the Renaissance artist Quentin Massys. It is titled "The Money Lender's Wife." The money lender is sitting at a desk with a measuring scale in his hand and a pile of coins in front of him. He is carefully assessing the weight and value of each coin. But our eyes are also drawn to look at his wife. She is leafing through a Bible or some religious book. Perhaps she was having her devotions. But she is distracted from her time with God by the coins.

Massys painted this portrait to show us how easily money can pull us away from the joy that comes from God. As The Beatles sang,

The best things in life are free.
But you can keep them for the birds and bees.
Now give me money...
Yea, that's what I want.

All of us feel this tension at times. Therefore Solomon wants us to understand the vanity of chasing after the Almighty Dollar.

If you see the oppression of the poor, and the violent perversion of justice and righteousness in a province, do not marvel at the matter; for high official watches over high official, and higher officials are over them.
(Ecclesiastes 5:8)

The Preacher is going to warn us about loving money, but he begins with the oppression of the poor by government bureaucrats. And we would expect the verse to read "If you see the oppression of the poor – do something about it." But instead we are told "do not marvel at the matter."

Now, Solomon is not saying to excuse this injustice, just to remember we live in a fallen, sinful world. One official keeps an eye on the other making sure that each one gets a cut of the money or property.¹ And the poor can't keep paying for services and so they are oppressed. It is all the result of greed. Next comes a highly misunderstood verse.

Moreover the profit of the land is for all; even the king is served from the field.
(Ecclesiastes 5:9)

There are many different translations of this verse, because the Hebrew text is vague. Perhaps the best translation is this,

Everyone gets a cut off the land, even the king gets his share.

In our day and time we might say we are paying sales taxes, property taxes, state taxes, federal taxes, gas taxes, phone taxes, utility taxes, corporate taxes and even death taxes. And everyone seems to make money off of those taxes

¹ The term "high official" is used elsewhere of arrogant, wicked people. See Isaiah 10:33.

except for the people paying all those taxes! All of this seems to be an inescapable injustice that happens again and again in history.

This is why it is foolish to think that a new governor or President or legislature will solve all of our problems. Yes, we should vote and try to elect good people to office. But we should keep our hope for a better administration on the return of Christ and the coming kingdom of God.² Now comes a more personal warning.

He who loves silver will not be satisfied with silver;
Nor he who loves abundance, with increase.
This also *is* vanity.
(Ecclesiastes 5:10)

The repetition of the word “loves” points to people who live for money. They pursue it like a hound chasing a fox. But chasing after money is an empty goal because those who love it will never have enough. The hunger pain for what money can supposedly buy is never satisfied. And it can lead to trouble. The apostle Paul wrote,

For the love of money is a root of all *kinds of* evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.
(1 Timothy 6:10)

Our Lord Jesus Christ warns us saying, “Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses.”³ Some of us have so much stuff we can’t fit it all in our houses, so we rent storage lockers!

When goods increase,
They increase who eat them;
So what profit have the owners
Except to see *them* with their eyes?
(Ecclesiastes 5:11)

When people get rich they need a maid to clean the house, a gardener for the yard, a nanny to watch the kids, a chauffeur, an accountant and on and on: whoosh, goes the money.

² Isaiah 11:1-10

³ Luke 12:15

The sleep of a laboring man is sweet,
Whether he eats little or much;
But the abundance of the rich will not permit him
to sleep.
(Ecclesiastes 5:12)

As a general rule people who work hard all day have no trouble sleeping. Those who are rich worry about the stock market or all the people who want a piece of their pie.

There is a severe evil *which* I have seen under the sun:
Riches kept for their owner to his hurt.
¹⁴ But those riches perish through misfortune;
When he begets a son, *there is* nothing in his hand.
(Ecclesiastes 5:13, 14)

One of the reasons why worshipping the Almighty Dollar is vanity is that the money you have today will belong to someone else tomorrow. Trying to make more money the riches perished through “misfortune” in other words a bad business deal. Now the man has nothing to pass on to his children.

As he came from his mother’s womb, naked shall he return,
To go as he came;
And he shall take nothing from his labor
Which he may carry away in his hand.
¹⁶ And this also *is* a severe evil—
Just exactly as he came, so shall he go.
And what profit has he who has labored for the wind?
(Ecclesiastes 5:15-16)

In the New Testament the apostle Paul told us the same truth.

...we brought nothing into *this* world, *and it is* certain
we can carry nothing out. ⁸ And having food and clothing,
with these we shall be content.
(1 Timothy 6: 7, 8)

The only things we can take into eternity, if we are saved by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ, is what we have done with our money, time and skills for God and the good of others through our faith, hope and love.

All his days he also eats in darkness,
And *he has* much sorrow and sickness and anger.
(Ecclesiastes 5:17)

In biblical times eating was a joyous, social event—the more the merrier. But now the lover of money has empty pockets. He has no real friends, the gas and electricity have been turned off. And he eats alone depressed and angry in the dark. Chasing after wealth to achieve happiness is vanity—grasping for the wind. But there is a better way to live whether you are rich or poor; enjoy whatever God has given you.

Here is what I have seen: *It is good and fitting for one to eat and drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labor in which he toils under the sun all the days of his life which God gives him; for it is his heritage.* ¹⁹ As for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth, and given him power to eat of it, to receive his heritage and rejoice in his labor—*this is the gift of God.* ²⁰ For he will not dwell unduly on the days of his life, because God keeps *him* busy with the joy of his heart.
(Ecclesiastes 5:18-20)

The power to enjoy what we have, whether little or much, comes from God. If you love Him and trust and serve Him life is full. Without Him life is empty. You will try to fill the hole in your heart with money and things and activities, but it will never satisfy—you'll always want more. There is a balance to life and money. And I think Proverbs makes a good point.

Two *things* I request of You
(Deprive me not before I die):
⁸ Remove falsehood and lies far from me;
Give me neither poverty nor riches—
Feed me with the food allotted to 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.
(Proverbs 30:7-9)

There is good wisdom here. But the New Testament goes even beyond this. In Philippians 4, the apostle Paul wrote,

I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content:
¹² I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound.
Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need.
¹³ I can do all things through Christ[b] who strengthens me.
(Philippians 4:11-13)

So be thankful for what you have. Trust God, enjoy life, share with others, and don't end up in the dark.

Now, as we move on to chapter 6 the subject is still money. And it is one of the darkness passages in the Bible. The story is more tragic than the one in chapter 5. Here is the story of a man God gave power to gain wealth. But God does not enable him to enjoy it.

There is an evil which I have seen under the sun, and it is common among men: ² A man to whom God has given riches and wealth and honor, so that he lacks nothing for himself of all he desires; yet God does not give him power to eat of it, but a foreigner consumes it. This is vanity, and it is an evil affliction.
(Ecclesiastes 6:1, 2)

As I said this story is much more tragic than the one in chapter 5. In chapter 5 someone love money and pursues it. Here is a person whom God has allowed to be rich. He has everything his heart desires. But God does not allow this person to enjoy what he has. Why?

Well, perhaps this person was not rich toward God with his wealth. Perhaps he never shared it with others. Perhaps he was never thankful. So eventually all of his wealth was taken by a foreigner.

If a man begets a hundred *children* and lives many years, so that the days of his years are many, but his soul is not satisfied with goodness, or indeed he has no burial, I say *that* a stillborn child is better than he—⁴ for it comes in vanity and departs in darkness, and its name is covered with darkness. ⁵ Though it has not seen the sun or known *anything*, this has more rest than that man, ⁶ even if he lives a thousand years twice—but has not seen goodness. Do not all go to one place?
(Ecclesiastes 6:3-6)

You can have a long life and many children, which are both blessings from God. But without thankfulness, without using what God has given you for good, without loving and serving people, you will die unsatisfied and un-mourned. To die and remain unburied meant that in life you were despised and so in death you are un-mourned.⁴

⁴ Jeremiah 22:18, 19. King Jehoiakim was a wicked king who taxed his people heavily. He made them build his splendid palace without pay. He was killed in battle and his corps was left dishonored and unburied.

A still born child would be better off than this person, because it would never experience any of the sinful and painful realities of life. Better to have been miscarried at birth than to miscarry in life. Remember the Preacher is thinking about life under the sun, without respect to God. Those whose lives revolve around money, without regard to the things of God end up empty and they perish.

Solomon has made two powerful points. First, people who love money and pursue it as life's goal will never be satisfied. And secondly, it is evil when people have money but never enjoy it, because they are not rich towards God and they never share what they have with others. The New Testament declares,

Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy. ¹⁸Let them do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share, ¹⁹storing up for themselves a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life.
(1 Timothy 6:17-19)

Back to Ecclesiastes.

All the labor of man *is* for his mouth,
And yet the soul is not satisfied.
⁸For what more has the wise *man* than the fool?
What does the poor man have,
Who knows *how* to walk before the living?
⁹Better *is* the sight of the eyes than the wandering of desire.
This also *is* vanity and grasping for the wind.
(Ecclesiastes 6:7-9)

The sinful reality is that no matter what we have, without God we are never satisfied. It is better to live wisely than foolishly. But wise people have cravings that are never satisfied. And poverty doesn't redeem us from life's cravings either. In this fallen world desire is a hobo never content to stay home. Without God are desires are always wandering and never arriving.

A vivid example of always wanting more comes from the excavation of the ancient city of Pompeii. When Mt. Vesuvius erupted Pompeii was buried in ash. Many people died right where they stood or lay. The shape of their bodies preserved in the ash. Every facial expression was set in stone.

One woman standing had her feet pointed towards the door of her home trying to escape. But her face was turned back as her arm reached back to grasp at something. It was a bag of pearls the person behind her had dropped. Rather than escape the woman was statuesque in a pose of unattainable desire.⁵ This is temptation for all of us: to turn from life to death as we reach for something we think will satisfy us. The truth is that only God can ultimately meet our deepest needs. Without God life is just the same old, same old. And who knows what happens after that?

Whatever one is, he has been named already,
For it is known that he *is* man;
And he cannot contend with Him who is mightier than he.
¹¹ Since there are many things that increase vanity,
How *is* man the better?

¹² For who knows what *is* good for man in life, all the days
of his vain life which he passes like a shadow? Who can
tell a man what will happen after him under the sun?
(Ecclesiastes 6:10 -12)

These verses sit at the half way mark of Ecclesiastes. And if Solomon has said it once, he has said it many times: there is nothing new under the sun. What God has decreed for sinful man is what it is. Technology aside the human condition is what it has always been since the time of Adam's first sin. And you cannot argue with God. He told Adam what would happen if he sinned and that's the way it is.

With these words we have come all the way back to where we began in Ecclesiastes concerning the meaning and purpose of life. What is life all about? What happens when we die? Why do we suffer so much disappointment in life? Why is there evil and injustice? Solomon is pushing us, daring us to cry out that we desperately need a Savior.

The message of Ecclesiastes is clear: we have a choice between two ways of life. We can chase after the Almighty Dollar that never satisfies and in the end may lead to sorrow. Or we can do our work, trust God to give us our daily breads and enjoy life as we can. Our Lord Jesus Christ presented us with this choice as well. He said,

No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God

⁵ Ecclesiastes: Concordia Commentary

and mammon [riches].
(Matthew 6:24)

And so, if we do not pursue wealth how should we then live? Again, Jesus Christ tells us, “seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all [that you need] shall be added to you.”⁶

⁶ Matthew 6:33