

Wealth

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Date: 17 November 2019

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[0 : 00] That's Ecclesiastes chapter 5, beginning at verse 8 to 6, verse 9. If you see in a province the oppression of the poor and the violation of justice and righteousness, do not be amazed at the matter, for the high official is watched by a higher, and there are yet higher ones over them.

But this is gain for a land in every way, a king committed to cultivated fields. He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income.

This also is vanity. When goods increase, they increase who eat them. And what advantage has their owner but to see them with his eyes?

Sweet is the sleep of a labourer, whether he eats little or much, but the full stomach of the rich will not let him sleep. There is a grievous evil that I have seen under the sun.

Riches were kept by their owner to his heart, and those riches were lost in a bad venture. And he is father of a son, but he has nothing in his hand.

[1 : 27] As he came from his mother's womb, so shall he go again, naked as he came, and shall take nothing for his toil that he may carry away in his hand.

This also is a grievous evil. Just as he came, so shall he go. And what gain is there to him who toils for the wind? Moreover, all his days he eats in darkness, in much vexation and sickness and anger. Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one's toils under the sun, the few days of his life that God has given him, for this is his lot.

Everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil, this is the gift of God.

For he will not much remember the days of his life, because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart. There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, and it lies heavy on mankind, a man to whom God gives wealth, possessions and honour, so that he lacks nothing of all that he desires.

[2 : 46] Yet God does not give him power to enjoy them, but a stranger enjoys them. This is vanity. It is a grievous evil. If a man fathers a hundred children and lives many years, so that the days of his years are many, but his soul is not satisfied with life's good things, and he also has no burial, I say that a stillborn child is better off than he.

For it comes in vanity and goes in darkness, and in darkness its name is covered. Moreover, it has not seen the sun or known anything, yet it finds rest rather than he.

Even though he should live a thousand years twice over, yet enjoying no good, do not all go to the one place. All the toil of man is for his mouth, yet his appetite is not satisfied.

For what advantage has the wise man over the fool? And what does the poor man have who knows how to conduct himself before the living? Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the appetite.

This also is vanity and a striding after wind. Well, please do turn back in the Bible to that first reading from Ecclesiastes chapter 5 on page 670.

[4 : 17] Page 670, Ecclesiastes chapter 5, as we pick up in our series of Ecclesiastes, where we left off a few weeks ago. I wonder how you like your films.

Do you like happily ever after? Boy gets girl or girl gets boy. The baddest plan is defeated by the gooddest. They certainly feel good, aren't they?

And you walk out of the cinema feeling happy about the world, feeling good about things, that everything works out as it should do in the end. How we might wish the whole of life was like that.

Or do you like a bit more realism? In your films. We went to see Bates a few weeks ago. It's a film about the tension in a Cornish fishing village between the locals trying to scratch out a living and the wealthy incoming new people.

For anyone who's ever been on holiday to an established rural community, it is a film that is profoundly unsettling. And we went out for lunch afterwards and we found ourselves asking all kinds of uncomfortable questions about ourselves and about life.

[5 : 40] But here's another question. How do you like your Bible books? Do you like the ones that send you out rejoicing and feeling good about life? Or do you like the ones that are profoundly unsettling?

Ecclesiastes falls into the second category of those as it describes the world we live in, a world under the wrath of God, what it's like, if you like, to live outside the Garden of Eden, a world in which everything has been caught up and swept away in this tsunami of sin, a world that is groaning, a world in which you and I groan.

And yet the words of this book are the words of God. It's how the book ends, by telling us these are the words given to us by the one shepherd, God himself.

Not to spoil our fun, but to help us to be realists. It's why I've called this series of talks in Ecclesiastes, Making the Most of Life, because that is what they help us to do.

Whether we're disciples of Jesus Christ or whether we're skeptics or whether we're just looking on the Christian faith, they're words all of us need to hear. They will stand, Ben and William, in good stead.

[7 : 01] As the rest of us, they will stand us in good stead as we live in a world which groans. And today we're thinking about wealth and money.

And you'll see there's an outline of the talk on the back of the service sheet, which you might find it helpful to follow. Firstly, let's think about the problem with wealth. Chapter 5, verse 10.

He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income. This also is vanity. It's the word which we see throughout this book.

Not so much meaningless as some Bibles translate it, but rather the word vanity literally means a breath. So you breathe in on a cold winter's morning, you breathe out, you see your breath in front of you just for a moment, and then it's gone.

And life is like that. It is short. Here today, gone tomorrow. And the same is true for our wealth and for our possessions and riches.

[8 : 16] You see, the problem of wealth that Ecclesiastes 5 and 6 identifies for us is that it deceives us, which is why we need to be certain and convinced of three things.

Firstly, that wealth doesn't satisfy. Verse 10 again, he who loves money will not be satisfied with money. And yet, of course, our whole economy is geared to persuading us that if only we had more, we'd be satisfied.

Watch out for the adverts for Black Friday and Christmas shopping, bombarding and bamboozling us over the next few weeks, trying to persuade us that life is like a game, a game in which the person who has the most stuff wins.

There was an interview recently with the actor Rupert Everett. He spoke about how he once dreamt of being a big Hollywood star, along with the wealth and riches and fame and all the rest of it that go with it.

Speaking of his disappointment of having not achieved that, he said, I think everyone's disappointed. Everyone wants to have more. And yet, when we do have more, what happens?

[9 : 41] Verse 11, when goods increase, they increase who eat them. What a lovely picture that is. And what advantage has their owner but to see them with their eyes?

The more we buy, the more we want to buy. And at the end of the day, what can we do with all the stuff that we've bought? Well, we can look at it.

The car, you can look at it. The pair of shoes, you can look at them. The sofa, you can look at it. But it's just a sofa, it's just a pair of shoes, it's just a car.

What's more, wealth does your mental health no good at all. Verse 12, sweet is the sleep of a laborer, whether he eats little or much, but the full stomach of the rich man will not let him sleep. Sleepless nights, perhaps through indigestion or the worry and anxiety of trying to hold on to your wealth or accumulate more. Like the woman I was hearing about, who turned to her husband in bed one evening and told him to roll over, only to hear him reply in a state of semi-consciousness, that's 20 million.

[10 : 54] It's what wealth does to you. It just goes round and round and round. You can't get it out of your system, even when you're asleep. And it's how the section ends.

Wealth doesn't satisfy, chapter 6, verses 7 to 9. All the toil of man is for his mouth, yet his appetite is not satisfied. For what advantage has the wise man over the fool?

And what does the poor man have who knows how to conduct himself before the living? Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the appetite. This also is vanity and the striving after wind.

Our wandering appetites always want more. Fueled by an advertising industry that is constantly trying to persuade us to upgrade our lifestyles.

It works like an addiction, always wanting the next thing and the next thing and the next thing, always wanting the next thing, of course, because the next thing doesn't satisfy. The fact is, if there's anything worse than the addiction money brings, it's the emptiness that money leaves.

[12:02] Secondly, wealth doesn't bring security, verses 13 and 14. There is a grievous evil that I have seen under the sun. Riches were kept by their owner to his hurt and those riches were lost in a bad venture and he is a father of a son but he has nothing in his hands.

The point here, really, is that we might lose our money in this life. It's what happens. Think of the 1929 crash or the rampant inflation of the 1970s or the 2008 financial crisis.

Who knows what is just around the corner? But the point is, if we don't lose our riches in life, we will certainly lose them in death. Verse 15, as he came from his mother's womb, he shall go again.

Naked is he came and shall take nothing for his toil that he may carry away in his hands. This also is a grievous evil. Just as he came, so shall he go. And what gain is there to him who toils for the wind?

Nappies don't have pockets and nor just shrouds. That gradual process of downsizing from the house to the flat to the care home ends with nothing.

[13:20] It is just a toiling after the wind. It is a fruitless exercise. If life doesn't take your wealth away, then death certainly will.

In other words, life is rather like a game of monopoly. You can be fabulously wealthy. You can enjoy everything, all the riches that it brings. You can buy houses, you can buy property, you can feel good about yourself.

But as soon as the game finishes, with all that wealth you've accumulated, you can't even go down to the shop and buy a pint of milk.

Just as all our wealth and riches are useless, as soon as the game of life is over, they are of no benefit to us whatsoever. And the summary?

What does the life of a high flyer look like? Champagne and caviar at 30,000 feet? Hardly, verse 17. Moreover, all his days he eats in darkness in much vexation and sickness and anger.

[14:26] Whether it's the physical strain and exhaustion of long hours or the vexation over business schemes that don't work out or the anger over thwarted ambitions. The fashion designer Tom Ford, who turned Gucci into a multi-million pound brand, Powerhouse, was once asked in an interview what he valued the most.

And his answer, one word, sleep. He said, I can't sleep. I fear going to bed. When the interviewer then wrote up the interview for a magazine, the interviewer, he ended by commenting, in this overworked, money-obsessed culture, Tom Ford can only be one of millions dreaming of the great unpurchasable luxury of a good night's sleep.

Wealth doesn't bring security. It doesn't satisfy. It doesn't bring security. And thirdly, and I think probably for us most surprisingly, it doesn't bring enjoyment.

So far, God hasn't been mentioned at all in this section of Ecclesiastes, but now he's mentioned three times in as many verses. Chapter 5, verse 18. Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun, the few days of his life that God has given him, for this is his lot.

Rather than constantly wanting more, the writer urges enjoyment of what we have. As he surveys life in our broken world, he notices there are still some good things to enjoy, just as we saw back in chapter 3.

[16:08] You know, a good meal, a time out with friends, a holiday, whatever it is. And yet, the point is there's no automatic link between wealth and enjoyment.

You see, when we ask who wants to be a millionaire, I guess most of us put our hands up and say, yes, please, that'd be great. I'd be able to enjoy life. But we can't assume there is a direct link.

Chapter 6, verse 1, there is an evil that I have seen under the sun and it lies heavy on mankind, a man to whom God gives wealth, possessions, and honor so that he lacks nothing of all that he desires.

Yet God does not give him power to enjoy them, but a stranger enjoys them. This is vanity. It is a grievous evil. In other words, you can have everything but not the power to enjoy it.

Abigail Disney is the granddaughter of Walt Disney's brother. And when she was a student, a huge rise in the value of the family firm completely transformed their already comfortable lifestyle and her father celebrated by buying a private jet the size of a small commercial airliner.

[17 : 25] And she describes very movingly, really, the occasion when she had to fly back from California all the way to New York in this airliner on her own.

She says, I flew across the country overnight by myself on that giant plane and I was sitting there thinking about the carbon footprint and the number of flight attendants and the other pilots on call and what it was costing and I just wanted to be sick.

there's no automatic link between wealth and enjoyment because the power to enjoy what we have is a gift.

Chapter 5, verse 19, everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them and to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil, this is the gift of God.

It's expressed again in verse 20, for he will not much remember the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart. In a world where groaning and where the effects of sin are everywhere, where we live in a fallen world and yet there are still good things that God gives us to enjoy, God is the one who gives us the ability to enjoy them.

[18 : 48] Now, there may well be some of us here this morning and we need to be reminded that actually there are still things to enjoy in life, that God wants us to enjoy some of the things which there are in life.

Perhaps some of us have a kind of cosmic killjoy view of God or perhaps we just feel guilty about enjoying stuff. No, enjoy stuff, enjoy what you can, enjoy a good meal, enjoy time out with friends, enjoy whatever it is.

And yet, if we simply chase after enjoyment as the solution to this broken world, then we're going to find ourselves back in the world of Ecclesiastes chapter 2, chasing after pleasure and the conclusion is that it's all vanity.

Besides, of course, for many of us, we don't have a job that we enjoy or perhaps our circumstances, our family circumstances may be unhappy once. While, of course, the older we get, the more elusive joy becomes.

I've put Ecclesiastes chapter 12, verse 1 on the outline, the evil days come and the days draw near of which you will say, I have no pleasure in them.

[20 : 07] The problem with wealth. Let's think about the answer to wealth. wealth. The answer is to redirect our wealth.

I think the clue lies in chapter 6, verse 3, and that word soul. If a man fathers a hundred children and lives many years, so that the days of his life are many, but his soul is not satisfied.

You and I have a soul. We saw earlier in Ecclesiastes that God has put eternity into our hearts. We are made in God's image. We are made for a relationship with God.

It's why the Richard Dawkins view of humanity that we are simply a bunch of chemicals will always fail. It's why the advertising view of humanity that we are the clothes we wear or the car we drive or the phones we use or whatever it is will always fail.

It's why there's no automatic link between our wealth and enjoying life. life. It's why our wealth and possessions won't fix life and won't fix the world we live in.

[21 : 19] I wonder if you remember the baking disaster I mentioned a few weeks ago. You see, what do you do when you get that cake out of the oven and it's burnt?

It's ruined. There's hardly any resemblance at all between what you have on your kitchen top and the picture that you had seen a few hours early looking so fantastic in the recipe.

And all you can do is to, well you can sit down with that cup of coffee, you can enjoy the tiny bit of the cake that is fine. But I mean that's not really the answer is it?

That's not really the solution. That's not why you made it. Now what you need is an entirely new cake that has been baked to perfection. just as our world is ruined by sin.

And although you and I can enjoy the residue of God's creation goodness, his original creation design, we cannot fix life and we cannot fix the world in which we live.

[22 : 22] So what is the answer? Well it is that God is planning an entirely new world, a new creation. Indeed that is where the rest of the Old Testament from Ecclesiastes onwards is heading.

So turn if you will to that reading which we have from Isaiah chapter 65. Isaiah 65 page 756.

Because here the prophet Isaiah gives us a wonderful glimpse of this new creation which God will create, which this world is heading for.

Isaiah 65 verse 17, For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind.

And then in verses 20 to 24, we're given many of the things that feature in that world of Ecclesiastes. And instead of being ruined, they will be perfected.

[23 : 33] And strikingly, many of the things that we see as features of life in this world in Ecclesiastes are completely either absent or transformed in that new creation.

Verse 18, I create Jerusalem to be a joy and her people to be a gladness. Verse 20, No more shall it be that an infant who lives but a few days or an old man does not fill out his days.

Verse 21, They shall build houses and inhabit them. They shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit. They shall not plant and another eat.

For like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain or bear children for calamity.

For they shall be the offspring of the blessed of the Lord and their descendants with them. In other words, if you and I are looking for satisfaction and security and joy in wealth and riches in this world, or those of us who are parents, if we are encouraging our children to do the same thing, then we are looking in entirely the wrong place.

[24 : 53] They are elusive. They will always be elusive. God has made the experience of us living in this world precisely as it is, so that we realize there's something very wrong with this world that we cannot fix, and so that instead we look ahead to the new creation to come.

Which is why, when we come to the New Testament, Jesus Christ redirects our wealth to serving that new creation.

Jesus describes, you'll remember, his kingdom as being so valuable that it's worth selling everything you have to get it. He likens it to the man who discovers treasure in a field, and he goes away, he sells everything he has to buy the field to get the treasure.

Jesus provides us with riches which outweigh everything this world can provide. He gives himself. He died on the cross for the forgiveness of sins. He gives us his presence for those who trust him, living with us day by day by his spirit.

He gives us his future for the new creation, and in the new creation. I don't know about you, but I think it's so easy to lose sight of the enormous wealth and riches that we have if we belong to Jesus Christ.

[26 : 21] I'm conscious that won't describe everyone here this morning, but it will describe many. Perhaps rather like the family you may have read about over the summer and how in 1964 their grandfather bought a small chess piece for five pounds, which was subsequently handed down through the family.

Until earlier this year, they discovered it was one of four missing pieces of a medieval ivory chess set known as the Lewis Chessman. And that five pound chess piece was sold at auction in July for 735,000 pounds.

They possessed something of enormous value. And he had actually just become part of the family furniture. And it's so easy to do that with the Lord Jesus.

Perhaps if we've been brought up in a Christian hope or we've been following Jesus for a while. So will you turn as we finish to Luke chapter 12, which we are looking at in our growth groups a few weeks ago.

Luke chapter 12, page 1050. where we see that the Lord Jesus redirects our wealth from serving ourselves to serving his kingdom.

[27 : 46] Luke chapter 12, verse 29, from serving ourselves, verse 29, do not seek what you are to eat and what you are to drink, nor be worried. For all the nations of the world seek after these things, and your father knows that you need them from serving ourselves to serving his kingdom.

Verse 31, instead seek his kingdom, and these things will be added to you. Fear not, little flock, for it is your father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, give to the needy, provide yourselves with money bags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that do not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys, for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

When you and I use our wealth and our money to gain stuff for ourselves, to gain satisfaction and security and enjoyment, it will fail us.

It's just worth stopping for a moment. Most of us, after all, are wealthy. What does our wealth say about us? If we drive the same kind of car as everyone else, or have the same kind of holidays as everyone else, or spend the same amount creating a beautiful home, or have the same size pension pot stashed away, what does it say?

Do we really believe Ecclesiastes 5 and 6? Do we really believe these words of the Lord Jesus here in Luke chapter 12? wealth? They're uncomfortable questions, aren't they?

[29 : 26] They're certainly questions I need to ask, and I suspect they're questions that many of us need to ask. The way we use our wealth should make it very clear that we are not serving ourselves, but we are serving Jesus' kingdom instead.

Because, of course, the glorious thing is that riches and wealth invested in serving Jesus' kingdom won't fail. Riches invested in gospel ministry, in establishing new churches, in training people for ministry, in preparing people for eternity, in mission partners taking the gospel overseas, in countless other ways, which we do both as a local church and some of us, I guess, individually, those riches won't fail.

Not to mention, of course, that the wonderful promise in verse 34 at the end there, that as we redirect our wealth, it doesn't just grow Jesus' kingdom, it also changes our hearts.

Let's spend some time in reflection, and then I shall lead us in prayer. These are the collected sayings, they are given by the one shepherd.

Heavenly Father, we thank you that in your loving shepherd care for us, thank you that you give us the book of Ecclesiastes, and thank you that you kindly show us the problem with wealth, that it doesn't satisfy, it doesn't bring security, that it doesn't bring enjoyment.

[31 : 04] Thank you for the way in which you so kindly show us why our world is as it is, a groaning world, a world in which we groan. And we thank you above all for the Lord Jesus, we thank you for his death upon the cross, we thank you for the promise of the new creation, and we pray all those of us who trust in him, please would you set our sights on that future creation.

We pray that we would invest our wealth and money wisely. not in ourselves and in this world, but in serving Jesus' kingdom and in that new creation to come.

And we ask it in Jesus' name, amen. Amen.