

Serving the Right Master Rightly

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[0 : 00] And as we begin today, I want to tell you about a guy I know called Freddie. Freddie is a Christian and he's married with children and he's about my age.

He works in finance in a big office in the city. Freddie likes sport and the outdoors. He enjoys a good movie. But he will tell you that his real hobby is investing his money and that sort of thing. He's got a couple of rental properties. He's got a big share portfolio. And lately he's decided to put his money into cryptocurrency as well just to see what all that is about.

When he's not working, Freddie's usually on his phone checking what the markets are doing and looking for new opportunities. And actually that's pretty much what everyone in his office does as well.

And pretty much what everyone in the office talks about as well. Because Freddie's a Christian, he goes to church usually once a month.

[0 : 57] But he certainly goes more than once if he's got a big problem that he needs God's help with, which for Freddie is usually something to do with his cash and an investment. At church, no one minds that Freddie only turns up once a month.

It's a pretty standard sort of Anglican setup. They've got a lovely, you know, classic churchy building, which means every time Freddie goes, there's always a baptism of some random family. Freddie doesn't mind, of course, because he knows he'll never see that family again. He was joking to me the other day about how holy he felt because he managed to turn up to church five minutes earlier.

He wanted to pray, you see, because Freddie's got a big promotion that he's chasing at work. Freddie reckons that he and the Lord have struck a deal. And if God gives him the promotion, Freddie will up his financial giving at church, you know, just to cut God in on a slice of the action. But last week, instead of the regular minister to church, there was a guest preacher. And the preacher looked at the passage which we're looking at today, which is quite a coincidence, I thought.

[2 : 08] And the preacher read out verse one. Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools who do not know that they do wrong.

This verse talks about being on guard when you approach God, not being foolish with him, you know, sacrificing, making big promises on a Sunday and then continuing to serve yourself for the rest of the week.

Caution with God is the idea. The preacher spoke about listening rather than speaking when he read out verse two. Do not be quick with your mouth.

Do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth. So let your words be few. And if that is true, who do you think should be doing the talking and who should be doing the listening?

Maybe from heaven, God already knows how Freddie feels about the promotion. Maybe from heaven, God already sees what would be good for Freddie in this situation.

[3 : 22] Maybe Freddie should have practiced some caution with God instead of trying to bargain and negotiate for his favor. And you can hear that caution in verse four to six.

When you make a vow to God, do not delay to fulfill it. He has no pleasure in fools. Fulfill your vow. It is better not to make a vow than to make one and not fulfill it. Do not let your mouth lead you into sin.

Instead of making promises, it would have been better for Freddie to keep quiet. Verse six says empty promises to God are a sin.

He will hold us to our word. He will come and collect. Verse six. Do not protest to the temple messenger. Oh, my vow was a mistake. I think back in those days, temple messengers were sent by the priests to collect.

Collect when people offered up sacrifices and made vows and pledges for money. We called it caution. But the end of verse seven says, therefore, fear God.

[4 : 26] See, fear should have been Freddie's approach. Less talking and more listening because God is in heaven and Freddie's down here on earth. And it's not the other way around.

And that idea, it recalibrates our attitudes to God. It's a stark reminder about the order of the universe. Less talking and more listening.

That doesn't mean we shouldn't pray when we've got a big problem. Of course, we should take it to God. He's our father. Remember. But a relationship just on our terms of just us talking seems to flip the order of the universe.

Less talking, more listening is the idea. So you could imagine God saying to Freddie, look, I've heard all your words about your promotion. But how about listening to my words about loving your wife?

And how about listening to my words about repentance? A little bit of heartfelt confession, perhaps. Yes, wisdom, says the preacher, would be more listening and less talking.

[5 : 33] And in this church here, I think that explains why we focus on having the Bible read and taught. This is where God speaks and we practice our listening.

The prayers are usually afterwards because that's when we talk back. And speaking of churches like Freddie's church, we love a good baptism here. When it's the child or the grandchild of one of the members of the congregation, it's a great celebration.

But if it's a random person off the street, which we get many phone calls about, we want to, I guess, put them through, make them jump through a few hoops, as it were.

We want to run them through the promises so they know what they're saying on the day. Because at a baptism, the priest will say this to the godparents. Do you turn to Christ?

Do you repent of your sin? Caution and fear with God means not mocking him with empty promises and gestures. A young couple in my small group, they're getting married and I'm doing a marriage prep course with them.

[6 : 41] And it's been really great to spend some time looking at the marriage vows and taking them seriously. So they know what they'll be promising to one another before God on that special day.

Here are those promises that they'll be making. I, husband, in the presence of God, take you to be my wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, so long as we both shall live.

All this I vow and promise. And so I wonder how couples are going at keeping those words to one another. For better or worse, remember?

In sickness and in health. Every week at this church, just for the record, personally, I see many examples of husbands and wives keeping these promises.

Even, in fact, decades and decades after they have made them. Actually, you don't even have to be married to make promises like this. Anyone who's even been a bystander at a wedding in a church, you will have made a promise too on that day.

[8 : 05] See if this sounds familiar. Families and friends, you are witnesses to these vows. Will you do everything in your power to uphold husband and wife in their marriage? And we all said, we all said we will, didn't we?

And so, are we helping husbands and wives to hold fast to their promises? Are we praying for them?

That would be a great start. Encouraging them gently not to gossip about one another when the other's not there. At 10.30, here's an idea.

If you're able, are you able to babysit for a mum and dad so they could have a date night? A couple here in the church rang me up and said, right, we're taking you out, you and your wife out.

No questions asked. Great. Thank you very much. We all promised before God at some point in our lives to help husbands and wives, maybe our own husband or wife, with promises like these.

[9 : 13] Verse 4. When you make a vow to God, do not delay to fulfill it. He has no pleasure in fools. Fulfill your vow. It is better not to make a vow than to make one and not fulfill it.

And, of course, with words like these, we might be feeling a bit bashed up. Any sermon on keeping your words is going to be rough when you turn and apply them to marriage vows. We've all failed. Big ways and small. I think the recent report about the rates of domestic violence, even in Christian marriages, shows that we're all failures. There's no need for pretenses in this church. God is in heaven. Remember, he sees everything. He sees our marriages. He's aware of how we've broken our word. And so here's some good news for the bashed up Christian. God is gracious and merciful. In Jesus, we have the forgiveness of our sins. [10:18] His blood is greater than all the ways we have failed to keep our promises to one another. And that is the gospel for a room full of failures.

And as Freddie sat and listened in the room, he thought about how casually he'd approach God with his words, about how quick and glib he was to bargain for God's favor and promise certain things for blessings. If God is in heaven and Freddie's down on earth, maybe serving God first and promotion second would have been the right order of things. And Freddie's mind quickly went to all his strivings for money and investment and wealth. And that's where the preacher goes with our next point. Look at verse 8. Here is poor person who, no matter what happens in life, they can't get a leg up because there is a higher official above them. And that higher official is eyed or looked out for by a mate. And these two officials line their pockets at the expense of poor person. And justice is denied. [11:43] The point is that human greed will always triumph over human justice. Human greed will trump human justice.

And as shocking as that is, verse 8 says, do not be surprised at such things. You see, this is life outside the garden. And maybe with the right moral correction, maybe with the right social pressure or the right legal protections, we can keep human greed at bay. But verse 10 says, whoever loves money never has enough. It's pretty self-explanatory, isn't it? Whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income. It's not that Freddie has oppressed anyone. But the seed of the same greed is there because he just wants more and more. It's not that money is a problem. It's just that chasing it, you'll never be satisfied. The preacher says this, too, is meaningless. It's futile, a vanity, a vapor, like the steam from a cup of coffee trying to hold it in your hand. [12:53] And one of the reasons for this is that more money equals more problems. Verse 11. As goods increase, so do those who consume them.

More money, more bills to pay. My brother, my younger brother, he works in sales and he works really hard to hit his monthly targets. But when he does well, he complains because the bigger the sales bonus each month, the bigger the bite the taxman takes out of his net paycheck. And he complained to me the other day. He said, I wonder why I bother with the long hours and the absolute slog it is to generate those sales. If the taxman is going to take such a big bite and I'm left with not much for my efforts. As goods increase, so do those who consume them. Verse 11. It says, what benefit our possessions to the owner except to feast their eyes on them? It's better to feast your eyes, to look at wealth from a distance rather than be freddy and try and strive for the promotion. At least he'll be stress free if he can just look at wealth from a distance. Verse 12. At least the poor laborer gets to sleep sweetly at night.

[14:07] But as for the rich, their abundance permits them no sleep. What price would you put on a good night's sleep? Not just with your kids, but just with all the cares and worries of the world. How much would you pay for 10 hours of great sleep? The poor person gets that. Not Freddie. And these verses are all about the futility of chasing money. And just for a laugh, the preacher has arranged them in a pyramid scheme. And I'm not even joking. Can I have this slide, please? You can see that. And I put it on the back of your handout. The idea is that verse 8 to 12 are mirrored on the other side by chapter 6, verse 7 to 9. And so on and so forward. And so if you flip over the page, on the opposite side of the pyramid, verse 7 has similar ideas to what we've seen. Verse 7. The appetite for wealth.

[15:07] That's never satisfied. Verse 8. What advantage have the wise over fools? None, is the answer. Verse 9. Better to see wealth from a distance rather than an insatiable appetite of greed.

And the next step up on the pyramid, the second step, that is for people who think they can chase money safely. Thanks, Tony. That's fine. Look at verse 13.

If you can flick back to chapter 5, please. Sorry for the flicking. Chapter 5, verse 13. I have seen a grievous evil under the sun. Wealth hoarded to the harm of its owners or wealth lost through some misfortune.

So that when they have children, there is nothing left for them to inherit. The idea here is that when we chase money, you won't get to hold on to it. These verses talk about harm and misfortune coming.

And we see that, don't we? Every time a small business fails, every time there's a recession or a stock market crash, a redundancy, perhaps the lockdown and its effects on small business in Victoria, something ungoverned by us will swallow up our money.

[16:19] I have a friend who is much older than me, doing really well financially. That is, they just managed to pay off the family home. They didn't own other homes, just the family home.

And they managed, worked all their life and paid off the family home. And three weeks after doing that, someone came to them with a business idea. Wasn't a great idea at all. Shonky even is probably the correct financial term.

And they remortgaged the house three weeks later on this business idea. Of course, that business failed. And the bank came and took the family home. And now, verse 14, there is nothing left for their children to inherit.

True story. In verse 15, the preacher says, Everyone comes naked from their mother's womb, and as everyone comes, so they depart. They take nothing from their toil that they can carry in their hands.

What's that saying? You can't take it with you. You can't hold on to it either, even when you get it. And on the opposite side of the pyramid is a similar idea. Can you please flick over to 6 verse 1?

[17:29] God gives people wealth, possessions, and honor, so that they lack nothing their heart's desire, but he doesn't let them enjoy them. Actually, sometimes it's a stranger who enjoys their cash.

And so, even if you invest your money wisely, even if you are sensible with your cat, your investments, you can't control whether your son or daughter marries an idiot.

It's funny because it's true. And that idiot, that fool, squanders away all the wealth that you hope to leave, and you spent your life saving up.

I don't want to laugh because it's very tragic, but maybe it is tragically funny. You can't hold on to it. You can't enjoy it. 6 verse 3.

The unborn baby has more rest than Freddie, who lies awake at night, stressed about promotion, stressed about what the markets are going to do and where the next opportunity is.

[18:34] Meaningless, meaningless. Chasing after the wind. It's like trying to hold steam from a cup of coffee in your hand. Oh, vanity of vanities, says Ecclesiastes.

A grievous evil. But that is life outside the garden, fallen and broken in a sinful world. And one solution to all of this will be to do what Jesus said in our second reading.

And that is to store up treasure in heaven. At least in heaven, moth and rust and vermin and thieves won't come in and destroy. Heaven is like a great big storage box where things are kept safe.

At least storing your treasure there, you know one day you'll get to enjoy it and hold on to it. The other solution is the top of our pyramid.

Look at 5 verse 18. 5 verse 18. This is what I observed to be good. That it is appropriate for a person to eat, to drink, to find satisfaction in the toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given them.

[19:42] For this is their lot. You see, the right approach for Freddie is to look at simple satisfactions. You can use your few days of life to chase down wealth, although that's meaningless, or go for contentment in simple things.

The example here is food and drink. And so this is the application. The next time you're at the supermarket, wander down the frozen food section and pick up yourself some ice cream.

It sounds silly, but that's the right application. Get some ice cream and treat yourself. You will find more overall satisfaction in that ice cream than Freddie will in all his chasings and strivings for a

promotion at the end of the day.

The next time you can have a great steak and a glass of red, do that. There will be more satisfaction in that steak and that glass of red than in all the strivings to predict what the market will do next.

Restaurants, they're still open, I believe. If you can afford it, get dressed up and go out for dinner. Have a great meal. Call up that friend who you haven't seen, maybe someone from church.

[20 : 52] Take them out for dinner and have a great conversation and a great meal. Life outside the garden is broken. We're only entitled to misery and fallenness.

If God gives you the means to go out for dinner with a friend, that is a gift. In fact, that is a good gift from a loving father who knows just what present you really need.

Verse 19. Moreover, when God gives someone wealth and possessions and the ability to enjoy them, to accept their lot and be happy in this toil, this is a gift from God.

And this is the main event today. A few moments ago, I used the word contentment. Verse 19 calls it accepting their lot and being happy. If you have wealth and possessions, which is basically almost all of us in the room, that is a gift from God.

Good. But even more than that, if you can be content with what God has given you and enjoy what he's given you, that is a gift too.

[21 : 56] Verse 20. You will seldom reflect on the days or the troubles of your life. Why? Because God has lovingly kept you occupied with gladness of heart.

The gladness of your possessions. You see, one of the futilities of chasing money is that you'll never be satisfied. Freddie is effectively saying that God didn't give him enough of a gift.

He's like, you know, those horrible children at children's parties when they're at their party and they're shouting, stamping their feet at mum and dad for not giving them a big enough present when all behind them is a room full of toys.

Freddie is like that. All the way through the passage, this pursuit of wealth is spoken of like an appetite or a hunger. When we look at our possessions, do we think God has given us a good meal?

Or do you think he has starved us? And we're still now wanting seconds and thirds and maybe even fourths, like a greedy child.

[22 : 58] The test for whether we are Freddie's or not is whether our money leads to contentment and satisfaction. You see, Freddie thinks that it's the money, it's the investments that are out of reach, but really it was contentment that it was out of reach.

The more money he had, he was still going for more. It was not enough. It was contentment that Freddie was actually searching for. He looked at all his stuff, all his money and possessions, his rental properties and share portfolio and thought that God was starving him.

He was too greedy to realize God had given him a banquet every day of his life. See, Freddie listened to the voices of his colleagues and all of their attitudes to money and wealth in metropolitan Melbourne.

Freddie listened to his affluent neighborhood and the keeping up with the Joneses and the looking sideways. Freddie listened to the lifestyle programs and the lifestyle magazines.

They all sell a discontentment with God and what he has given us. In our New Testament reading, Jesus completely agrees.

[24 : 12] And he said, No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you'll be devoted to the one and despise the other.

You cannot serve God and money. See, it's not that money is bad or investing money to make money is a sin. But we become Freddie when we serve money's appetite.

When we start to accuse God of starving us when quite clearly he has given us a banquet. Even by Melbourne standards, but certainly by worldly standards.

We're all wealthy in this room. This is a fallen world. We're not entitled to anything. The good things we have, that is a gift from God.

Let's enjoy them happily and contently rather than being foolish Freddie's trying to get more and more. So let me pray that we would not be Freddie.

[25 : 14] Father God, please would we do less talking and more listening to you. Thanks that you tell us what life outside the garden is like, that we're not entitled to anything.

And so we're so grateful that you are a gracious God. That you give us money and homes and wealth and clothes and three square meals a day. Father, please guard us from accusing you of starving us.

Please guard us from listening to the voices of our neighbourhood, the voices of colleagues and our culture. Please, Father, help us to enjoy what you have given us.

Help us to be content with what we have. And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.