

Book:	<i>Ecclesiastes</i>
Series:	<i>Two Ways to Live: Under the Sun or In the Fear of God</i>
Lesson 7:	<i>The Futility of Life, Part 7</i>
Text:	Ecclesiastes 5:8-20
Date:	Sunday, March 3, 2013

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Next Lesson:	Ecclesiastes 6:1-12

*Colonial Hills
Baptist Church*

Key



= Teacher Information



= Discussion Starter



TEACHING TIP

In our text, Solomon seems to be leading a conversation, rather than preaching a message. Work to be conversational in your teaching style, engaging your audience in such a way that they connect personally with the points being made.

Just a reminder of our current context: we're "exploring the darkness" of chapters 1-6, considering this theme—**life merely lived "under the sun" is futile**. In these chapters, this sobering reality is driven home by:

- the ceaseless cycle of existence (1:1-11)
- the emptiness of pleasure (2:1-11)
- the limitations of wisdom (1:12-18; 2:12-17)
- the frustrations of labor (2:18-26)
- the elusiveness of life (3:1-15)
- the bitterness of misfortune (3:16-4:16)
- the disappointment of wealth (5:8-20)
- the finiteness of humanity (6:1-12)

INTRODUCTION

Illustration: One of the most acclaimed Great American Novels is *The Great Gatsby*, authored by F. Scott Fitzgerald. The story takes place during the Roaring Twenties, a time of opulent prosperity in the United States after World War I. Although some have considered it the second best English novel of the 20th century (second to *Ulysses*), it is filled with the same depravity and disappointment as found in Ecclesiastes (cf. 2:1-11), for it follows the same quest.

The book is narrated by Nick Carraway who traces the lavish and dissatisfied life of Jay Gatsby. Nick describes Gatsby's "chasing of the wind" with the following summary: "Gatsby believed in the green light, the [exciting] future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther....And one fine morning—" But, the last line of the book sadly reveals that too often there is no "fine morning"—"So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."

What is so striking about Fitzgerald's depiction of life's elusiveness in his novel is that all his main characters are people of luxurious wealth. He depicts Jay Gatsby's rival, Tom, as "enormously wealthy." The narrator fills in the details, recording:

[Tom had] left Chicago and come East in a fashion that rather took your breath away; for instance, he'd brought down a string of polo ponies from Lake Forest. It was hard to realize that a man in my own generation was wealthy enough to do that. Why they came East I don't know. They had spent a year in France for no particular reason, and then drifted here and there unrestfully wherever people played polo and were rich together.

And elsewhere, they are described this way:

They were careless people, Tom and Daisy—they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made.

Indeed, there is "nothing new under the sun." Fitzgerald simply writes about the same disappointment of wealth that our Teacher, Solomon, discovered 3,000 years earlier—wealth and wistfulness, riches and ruin, luxury and loss, money and meaninglessness. In fact, *The Great Gatsby* dies the victim of a jealous murder suicide. As we read these two books, we are drawn to ask again, "For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" (Mark 8:36).

In our study through the book of Ecclesiastes, we're "exploring the darkness" of chapters 1-6. We have been learning that **life merely lived "under the sun" is futile**. As we turn to 5:8-20, we discover that the "life under the sun" worldview is not redeemed by dollar signs. Today, we take a fieldtrip to Hollywood, Manhattan, Wall Street, or even Geist and witness the great disappointment of wealth.

THE DISAPPOINTMENT OF WEALTH (vv. 8-17)

Several different aspects of the disappointment of wealth are considered in our text.


1. *Extortion* (vv. 8-9)

Solomon refers to the "the oppression of the poor and violent perverting of judgment and justice in a province" (v. 8). The Hebrew word for "oppression" is used both in that general sense (Psalm 119:134; Isaiah 54:14; Jeremiah 6:6) and in the more specific sense of "extortion"¹ (Leviticus 5:23; Psalm 62:10; Jeremiah 22:17). Not only does the multiplicity of financial references in our context² indicate that we should use the more specific meaning, but so also does the following phrase "violent perverting." That phrase translates one Hebrew word that is literally rendered "robbery" (Isaiah 61:8) and here refers to the "stealing away" of justice and righteousness by the local government (i.e., "in a province"). Thus, the term is used metaphorically, but in parallel to the literal theft that was taking place against the poor (cf. both terms are used in Leviticus 5:21; Psalm 62:11; Ezekiel 22:29).

Illustration: If you just Google "extortion stories" you will soon find your mind reeling and your stomach churning at some of the awful and brutal instances of extortion that permeate our society—from the computer service technicians who swindled \$20 million from a customer whom they convinced had been hacked by foreign

nationals,³ to a rabbi who bribed young children to falsely accuse another rabbi of abuse and then attempted to extort \$400,000 from that rabbi in exchange for leveraging the witnesses,⁴ to numerous professional athletes paying thousands to anonymous blackmailers in order to keep their past a secret.⁵ There are currently over 10,000 federal inmates serving time for extortion,⁶ and even from behind those walls, this oppression has devastated homes. Many inmates have discovered how to anonymously kidnap a fellow prisoner, text his family with pictures of his beaten body, and demand payment for him to be spared.⁷

Although Solomon fully expects that we have, like him, witnessed such extortion close to home (v. 8), he tells us to “marvel not at the matter” (cf. Genesis 43:33 for the term “marvel”), because “what goes around comes around.” Or, as he puts it, “The high official is watched by a higher, and there are yet higher ones over them” (ESV). A local justice-perverter is exploited by the regional manager, who is in turn oppressed by the national executive. Verse 9, which has admittedly been translated in different ways,⁸ serves to show (1) that this bitter oppression is rampant and widespread and (2) that this cycle of extortion can be traced all the way to the top—“The produce of the land is seized by all of them; even the king is served by the fields” (NET, NIV).

 If we remember what Solomon wrote in 3:17, what should we also be reminded of when we read the second half of verse 8? *That there is One who is highest over all, who will bring even the high ones to account for their extortion and oppression.*

2. *Disillusionment (v. 10)*


Illustration: Marilyn Monroe once said, “Dreaming about being an actress is more exciting than being one.” So also, Solomon discovered, is the idea of being wealthy more exciting than actually being wealthy.

Wealth is disappointing because of the disillusionment of materialism. Solomon reverts to proverbial wisdom in verse 10—“He that loveth silver [i.e., money] shall not be satisfied with silver [i.e., money]; nor he that loveth abundance [i.e., wealth] with increase.” Oh how deceptive money is, and nobody seems to believe this proverb until they’re living it!

Illustration: “Someone asked John D. Rockefeller, ‘How much money does it take to satisfy a man?’ Rockefeller replied, ‘Just a little bit more than he has.’”⁹

Illustration: The 1960s musical “Cabaret” told us that “money makes the world go around,” and many people have believed that lie, until they discovered that The Law of Diminishing Returns is true not only in workings of economics, but also in the rewards of economics.

Illustration: How frequently the legend of king Midas¹⁰ is lived out in today’s world. People who worship gold and find it increasing with their workaholic touch eventually discover that it takes away everything truly meaningful to them, and with Solomon, they conclude as does verse 10—“This is also vanity.” The hungriest of materialistic hearts and the richest of covetous aristocrats have all discovered that money does not satisfy.

 How have you discovered or witnessed the disillusionment of material gain—money or stuff?
open discussion



What counsel does Jesus provide us in Luke 16:1-13 regarding how to receive true satisfaction from physical wealth? (NOTE: Be careful not to spend too much time here, because the second main point of this lesson deals with the issue of true satisfaction and our wealth.) *He counsels us to use physical wealth for gospel purposes—to use it in such a way that we accrue eternal friends. For a refresher over this passage, I'd encourage you to listen to Pastor Phelps' message available here—<http://bit.ly/Wqf9GN>.*

3. Moochers (v. 11)

One very practical reason why money fails to deliver on its promises is given now in verse 11—as soon as his “goods increase, they are increased that eat them.” What taxes don’t immediately “eat” away, “friends” may. No sooner do we land a lucrative job or receive our hard-earned rewards than parasitic moochers show up, with seemingly sincere congratulations masking their self-centered appetites. Solomon had apparently seen this too often:

Proverbs 14:20 – “The poor is hated even of his own neighbor; but the rich hath many friends.”

Proverbs 19:4 – “Wealth maketh many friends; but the poor is separated from his neighbour.”

Proverbs 19:6 – “Many will intreat the favour of the prince; and every man is a friend to him that giveth gifts.”

Illustration: Well-researched statistics tell us that over 75% of NFL players are bankrupt or financially stressed two years after their retirement.¹¹ While financial naivety certainly plays its part in these sad stories, so do mooching friends who last only as long as the money does.

So, for these wealthy (or formerly wealthy) individuals (i.e., “owners”), what advantage (i.e., “good”) does their wealth give them? Solomon offers an answer at which we would laugh if it weren’t so sad. These miserable misers

only have gained this—the meaningless “beholding of [their riches] with their eyes.”¹²

4. Stress (v. 12)

And even that glance is dissatisfying, for instead of providing happiness in what has been earned, it brings stress over what might be lost.

Solomon writes, “The sleep of a labouring man is sweet, whether he eat little or much,” for he has mastered the wisdom of 4:6. He has learned to be content with working hard, but modestly, so that he might enjoy better things in life. Thus, while the rich find their wealth “eaten” by others, the laboring man is content with “little or much,” for he is “eating” what he himself has reaped. On the contrary, he who determines to find fulfillment in material gain soon learns the irony that “[his] abundance...will not suffer him to sleep.” “The anxieties of the man of money drive him to sleeping pills and tranquilizers.”¹³ And what is at the root of such endless stress? It is the fifth aspect of wealth’s disappointment—the possibility of losing it all.

5. Loss (vv. 13-17)

Solomon (and we) has seen a “sore evil” (cf. this phrase in 2:17; 5:12, 15; 6:1; 10:5) “under the sun”:

- V. 13 – A fellow had amassed and hoarded great riches, but had paid dearly for it (i.e., to [his] hurt). This “hurt” may be “moral decadence following ill-gotten gain or physical deterioration following restless nights (cf. 5:12).”¹⁴ Also, cf. 1 Timothy 6:9-10.
- V. 14 – Then, due to “evil travail”—either “bad luck” or a bad business deal¹⁵—he loses everything. Apparently, this even happened at the “worst” of times, for a baby boy had just been born to this now-destitute man, and he had nothing to pass on to him (i.e., neither provision nor inheritance).

- V. 15 – This individual is faced with the stark reality that he will indeed die just as he was born—“naked,” unable to “take [anything] of his labour, which he may carry away in his hand.”
- Vv. 16-17 – Solomon asks how he fared in his quest to find satisfaction from wealth (i.e., “what profit hath he?”), and in his depiction of that quest as merely “labour[ing] for the wind,” we learn that he both grasped at nothing and received nothing. His life’s pursuit is summarized by one word—“darkness” (cf. 2:13-14; 6:4; 11:8; 12:2-3), the details of which are just as gloomy (“sorrow,” “wrath,” and “sickness”).

What we are discovering here, then, is that the loss is not just financial, but also familial¹⁶ and physiological (cf. 2:22-23). He has lost both possessions and peace; he’s destroyed both his health and his home; he’s forfeited everything. Ironically, his material pursuits “under the sun” have left him in complete “darkness.”



How have you experienced or witnessed those tragic consequences (“loss,” “darkness,” “sorrow,” “wrath,” “sickness”) of this vain pursuit? *open discussion*

Application: Learn from the Teacher and put no confidence in money and materialism. Remind yourself of these five disappointments, summarized so well by verse 10—“He that loveth [money] shall not be satisfied with [money]; nor he that loveth [wealth] with increase. This is also vanity.”

Transition: A problem arises here, however: we all of necessity will interact with money, for on one level, “Money does make the world go around” (e.g., it pays our bills, provides for our needs, etc.). It seems, then, that we traverse the difficult road between the love of money on the one side and the need for money on the other. How does a wise individual traverse this terrain? Like he

did in 2:24-26, Solomon again briefly pulls back the curtains a bit to reveal the light. Having considered one way to live (i.e., “under the sun”), he also discusses its alternative (i.e., “in the fear of God”). So, we now turn our attention to verses 18-20, and having considered the dark disappointment of wealth, we now consider the brilliant economy of God.

THE ECONOMY OF GOD (vv. 18-20)

Before we consider the plans of God in these verses, we first need to issue a warning. Do not interpret this passage as providing financial guidance or strategies for financial security. This passage was not intended to be a workshop on how to handle your money. Instead, it serves as a pre-workshop, as a philosophy of wealth¹⁷ that must undergird any application of specific principles.

To state it more relevantly, this passage is not a Dave Ramsey seminar—it’s not intended to give us principles about getting out of debt, saving for the future, planning wisely for the unknowns, preparing for retirement, or determining a good budget. Instead, it’s the overarching counsel of God for people who are seeking for satisfaction from Him and are wondering how that relates to their money. Additional wisdom from God will be necessary as they flesh out this financial philosophy (i.e., these truths about God’s economy) in their daily decisions about their money and stuff.

With that said, let’s trace three truths discovered in God’s economy. We’ll use banking imagery to **illustrate** these points.

1. **We can make a withdrawal (v. 18).**

Verse 18 reads,

Behold that which I have seen: it is good and [fitting] for one to eat and to drink and to enjoy the good of all his labour that he taketh under the sun all the days of his life which God giveth him, for it is his portion.

Inspired by God, Solomon encourages us (again—cf. 2:24-26) to enjoy the life that God has given to us, and in this context, to enjoy the material profits that we receive from our labor. God encourages us to make a withdrawal from our bank account of life and to spend it enjoyably. Indeed, this is our “good” and “fitting” (cf. “beautiful” in its time [same word]—in 3:11) “portion” graciously “given” to us by the God who is our “portion” (Psalm 16:5). So what we are learning here is that the enjoyment of life’s earnings are a part of the “pleasures forevermore” and “fullness of joy” discovered “at God’s right hand” (Psalm 16:11; cf. Matthew 7:11; James 1:17-18) and allotted to us as a part of His beautiful and appropriate plan (3:11-13). But, more on that in #3 below.

With our previously stated qualifier in mind, we need to remind ourselves again that this does not relieve us from the necessary virtues and disciplines of contentment, responsibility, integrity, prayer, and thanksgiving when we withdraw enjoyment. Nor does this passage excuse us from “making deposits.” On the contrary, Solomon encourages us to enjoy “the good [i.e., fruit] of all [our] labor” (2x); in other words, he allows us to enjoy the fruit of what our diligent hard work has, in part, produced (NOTE: We say “in part,” because this fruit was also “given” to us by God, thus providing a balance between man’s responsibility and God’s sovereign graciousness; but this is the point in #2 below).

So, rather than interpreting his counsel as a statement to stop saving and start spending, we instead see here an injunction against hoarding money for money’s sake and a warning against worshipping the gift more than the Giver. We see an invitation from God to enjoy life (including its money and stuff) “in the fear of God.” And, again, even with that understanding, we quickly remind ourselves that this is not everything there is to say on this topic of money and materialism. We need to keep ourselves in the fear of God, ask for the wisdom of God, but allow ourselves to enjoy the gifts of God.

2. [Because] God has made a deposit (v. 19).

Verse 19 reads,

Every man...to whom God hath given riches and wealth, [He] hath [also] given him power [or ability] to eat thereof and to take [or accept] his portion and to rejoice in his labour; this is the gift of God.

With beautiful and financial logic, God tells us that it’s okay to make such a withdrawal, because He has made a deposit. The parallels between verses 18 and 19 are strikingly clear. We could rewrite these verses in our own words—“It is good and proper for us to eat, drink, and find joy from our labor (v. 18), because God has given to us food and drink and the ability to find joy in our labor (v. 19).” God has given us a portion (v. 18), and it is okay for us to “accept” and “rejoice in” that portion (v. 19). Again, this is because of the grace of God (i.e., “gift of God”—3:13; cf. the greatest deposit was Christ through whom flows all the other gifts—Romans 8:32; 1 Corinthians 3:22-23). God’s gifts vary at different times and to different people, but they are still gifts, given for a purpose, one of which may be for our pleasure and “rejoicing” (3:12, 22; 8:15; 11:8, 9). So, we can make a withdrawal in life, because God has made a deposit.

3. The balance will be joy (v. 20).

Verse 20 reads,

For he shall not much remember [or dwell on] the [fleeting] days of his life, because God answereth him in [or keeps him preoccupied with] the joy of his heart.

If we are enjoying God’s economy with wisdom and worship (i.e., “in the fear of God”), what happens when we “balance the checkbook”? What does the bottom line look like? Verse 20 summarizes this balance with one word and a beautiful promise. The word is “joy,” and the

promise is that our preoccupation with that joy (also given to us by God)¹⁸ will alleviate the sting of life on this cursed planet (cf. 1 Timothy 6:17). What we are simply discovering here is the truth of that beautifully worded statement of man's purpose found in the ancient confession—"Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever."¹⁹



Application: What are the negative effects of the love of money (vv. 8-17. cf. Matthew 19:23-24; Mark 4:19; 10:17-22)? *open discussion*

What are the blessings of wealth (1 Timothy 6:17-19; 2 Corinthians 8:1-24; 9:1-15)? *open discussion*

Check your own attitude to material possessions. Are you suffering any of the symptoms of corruption recorded in vv. 11-17? *open discussion*

How do you need to apply the antidote of vv. 18-20? *open discussion*

CONCLUSION

Our fieldtrip among the mansions, fashion malls, and opulent parties has taught us that true significance and fulfillment is not discovered there. Instead, "in the fear of God" it is found in your small 2 bedroom, 1.5 bath ranch home in the neighborhoods of Nora. Because that is "God's gift to you," and grateful contentment in it is the starting point of lasting joy.

ENDNOTES

¹ “The practice of obtaining something, especially money, through force or threats” (*New Oxford American Dictionary*).

² We have here *the poor* (5:8), *money* (5:10), the increase of ‘good things’ (5:11), *the rich man* (5:12), ‘riches’ (5:13–14), ‘riches and wealth’ (5:19; 6:2) and *the poor man* (6:8).

³ <http://bit.ly/YXxKvm>

⁴ <http://bit.ly/YXygd2>

⁵ <http://bit.ly/LzqoML>

⁶ <http://1.usa.gov/dtNya>

⁷ <http://bit.ly/VhbcV1>

⁸ “The syntax and exegesis of the line is difficult. There are three basic interpretive options: (1) the king takes care of the security of the cultivated land: ‘in any case, the advantage of a country is that there is a king for the cultivated land’; (2) the king is in favor of a prosperous agricultural policy: ‘in any case, the advantage of a country is that there is a king who is obeyed for the sake of the agriculture’; and (3) the king exploits the poor farmers: ‘the produce of the land is [seized] by all, even the king is served by the fields.’ Perhaps the best option in the light of the context is to take the referent of כֹּל (*kol*, ‘all’) to the government officials of 5:8 rather than to the people as a whole. The verse depicts the exploitation of the poor farmers by corrupt government officials. This is reflected in two English versions: ‘the increase from the land is taken by all; the king himself profits from the fields’ (NIV); ‘the profit of the land is among all of them; a cultivated field has a king’ (RSV margin)” (NET Bible note #27 in verse 5).

⁹ Jim Winter, *Opening Up Ecclesiastes*, Opening Up Commentary (Leominster: Day One Publications, 2005), 78.

¹⁰ <http://bit.ly/1xGYF6>

¹¹ <http://bit.ly/YCxx9u> and <http://cbsn.ws/15hJcGj>

¹² “Wealth accumulated and taken out of circulation no longer meets the owner’s needs and now serves only as a miser’s feast of staring at money” (Duane A. Garrett, vol. 14, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, The New American Commentary [Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993], 314). “His ‘benefits’ from the whole business are only to ‘feast his eyes on them’ before they disappear into other people’s pockets and mouths” (Iain Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, The NIV Application Commentary [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001], 127).

¹³ J. Stafford Wright, “Ecclesiastes” In , in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 5: Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 1170.

¹⁴ Michael A. Eaton, vol. 18, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 118.

¹⁵ “The basic meaning of עֲנָן (*‘inyan*) is ‘business; affair’ (HALOT 857 s.v. עֲנָן) or ‘occupation; task’ (BDB 775 s.v. עֲנָן). The term is used in a specific sense in reference to business activity (Eccl 8:16), as well as in a more general sense in reference to events that occur on earth (Eccl 1:13; 4:8). BDB suggests that the phrase רַע עֲנָן (*‘inyan ra’*) in 5:13 refers to a bad business deal (BDB 775 s.v. עֲנָן); however, HALOT suggests that it means ‘bad luck’ (HALOT 857 s.v. עֲנָן). The English versions reflect the same two approaches: (1) bad luck: ‘some misfortune’ (NAB, NIV) and (2) a bad business deal: ‘a bad investment’ (NASB), ‘a bad venture’ (RSV, NRSV, MLB), ‘some unlucky venture’ (Moffatt, NJPS), ‘an unlucky venture’ (NEB), ‘an evil adventure’ (ASV)” (NET Bible note #40 in verse 14).

¹⁶ For some of these negative familial affects seen in modern research, visit <http://1.usa.gov/X9VA9s>.

¹⁷ “The Preacher corrects the balance by making it clear that wealth is not inherently evil. The root of the problem is in the attitude of the heart and mind. Compare the vocabulary of the first section: ‘loves silver’, ‘loves abundance’, ‘riches kept for their owner’, ‘laboured for the wind’—with ‘God gives him’, ‘God has given riches and wealth’, ‘gift of God’, and ‘God keeps him busy with the joy of his heart.’ In the previous section wealth was viewed from an ‘under the sun’ perspective—now the Preacher raises his eyes and sees it in a different light. He now goes on to tell us what he has seen. Nothing has materially changed—but the attitude towards it has! Happiness comes when we recognize that all we possess belongs to God, because it comes from God. He even gives us the life in which we can possess things!” (Winter, 80-81).

¹⁸ “The Hebrew of *keep him occupied* is related to the term ‘business’ that we have had earlier. There is a ‘business’ that frustrates; but the ‘business’ of taking life from the hand of God is also preoccupying for those who view life that way” (*New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, ed. D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer and G. J. Wenham, 4th ed. [Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994], Ec 5:8–9). “The Hebrew of *keeps him occupied with* is linked with the term ‘business’ that has occurred throughout Ecclesiastes. There is a business that vexes and frustrates (cf. 1:13; 4:8), the life given to man to live within a vain world with its kinks and gaps (cf. 1:15). The Preacher repeats his remedy of a God-given life of faith and joy which is even more preoccupying” (Eaton, 119-120).

¹⁹ <http://bit.ly/XBvdCj> – the first question in this confession is summarized in this statement, “God is most glorified when we are most satisfied in Him” (Desiring God Ministries). According to our text, one way in which we find our satisfaction in Him is by gratefully accepting and enjoying His gifts.