

Ecclesiastes⁴

The Words of the Preacher

Lesson 3

Ecclesiastes Chapters 5 – 6

A Preacher's Warnings about God

Guard Steps and Listen

Ecclesiastes 5:1 Guard your steps as you go to the house of God, and draw near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools; for they do not know they are doing evil.

The writer's conclusion about God is in direct contrast to God's instruction. When it comes to dealing with God, Solomon says, "guard your steps ... listen rather than offer the sacrifice of fools." He also tells us not to bring up a matter in the presence of God.

Few, Careful Words

Ecclesiastes 5:2 Do not be hasty in word or impulsive in thought to bring up a matter in the presence of God. For God is in heaven and you are on the earth; therefore let your words be few. ³For the dream comes through much effort, and the voice of a fool through many words.

Solomon foolishly thinks that man can hide his thoughts and deeds from God because God is in heaven and man is on earth. The worldly man believes that God sits in heaven and pays no attention to the daily activity of man. He feels that if we do not let God in on what we are doing, He'll never know.

The Vow - Sinful Speech

Ecclesiastes 5:4 When you make a vow to God, do not be late in paying it, for *He takes* no delight in fools. Pay what you vow! ⁵It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. ⁶Do not let your speech cause you to sin and do not say in the presence of the messenger of God that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry on account of your voice and destroy the work of your hands? ⁷For in many dreams and in many words there is emptiness. Rather, fear God.

Solomon says that if we foolishly make a promise to God and cannot fulfill that promise, then God will "zap" us because we have sinned. For Solomon, it is better not to make a vow to God than to do so and fail. Whether or not we do something, either way is meaningless, so why bother? Therefore Solomon concludes that we should be afraid of God and not let Him know our thoughts.

No Shock at Oppression

Ecclesiastes 5:8 If you see oppression of the poor and denial of justice and righteousness in the province, do not be shocked at the sight, for one official watches over another official, and there are higher officials over them. ⁹After all, a king who cultivates the field is an advantage to the land.

It is the nature of the godless man to oppress the poor and deny justice. Solomon is reflecting on the plight of man. In 3:16-17, he has stated that there is wickedness in both the place of justice and the place of righteousness. Oppression and denial of justice will happen because someone in the chain of authority will have a wicked thought. Somewhere in the chain injustice will occur. Perhaps it could be because of personality conflicts. Perhaps it could be because someone in the chain is selfish and self-centered. Perhaps it could be

⁴ All Scriptures in this lesson entitled "The Ecclesiastes, the Words of the Preacher" are taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE, Copyright (C) 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1988, by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

because someone is trying to climb the ladder of success and does not care whom he hurts in the process. Injustice and oppression do not matter to the writer; it is more important that the work is getting done. People don't matter. Cultivating the land brings advantage to the land and it is more important than justice and oppression.

Money Will Not Satisfy

Ecclesiastes 5:10 He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves abundance *with its* income. This too is vanity.

Chasing after wealth does not bring satisfaction. It brings only meaninglessness. In the Book of Proverbs, Solomon says,

Proverbs 23:4-5 ⁴ Do not weary yourself to gain wealth, Cease from your consideration of it.
⁵ When you set your eyes on it, it is gone. For *wealth* certainly makes itself wings, Like an eagle that flies *toward* the heavens.

Takers

Ecclesiastes 5:11 When good things increase, those who consume them increase. So what is the advantage to their owners except to look on?

Prosperity attracts only takers to the worldly man. Those who acquire wealth will always have people looking to them for a hand out. They are takers, not givers. They take and never repay. In this writer's day, when a farmer had an extremely good crop, the word would spread fast and those who wanted to glean would increase in number. There was no advantage to the owner as he watched the edges of his crop stripped by passersby.

Sleep of the Rich Man and Working Man

Ecclesiastes 5:12 The sleep of the working man is pleasant, whether he eats little or much. But the full stomach of the rich man does not allow him to sleep.

Solomon makes a distinction between the working man and the rich man. We must suppose that the rich man does not perform physical labor in the writer's opinion because of that distinction. Some are rich because of inheritance but, usually, wealth gained by inheritance is quickly spent and depleted. Those who have gained wealth on their own initiative have usually acquired it though hard work. In this case, Solomon is probably distinguishing between the man who physically works⁵ and the man who has gained enough wealth that he does not have to work. In this case, the working person is going to have a pleasant sleep, whether he has eaten a lot or a little. On the other hand, the wealthy man who does no physical labor, eats until he is bloated and cannot find rest because of a lack of activity. In Solomon's eyes, it is the rich man's curse.

Evil Riches Hoarded – The Reward

Ecclesiastes 5:13 There is a grievous evil *which* I have seen under the sun: riches being hoarded by their owner to his hurt. ¹⁴ When those riches were lost through a bad investment and he had fathered a son, then there was nothing to support him. ¹⁵ As he had come naked from his mother's womb, so will he return as he came. He will take nothing from the fruit of his labor that he can carry in his hand. ¹⁶ And this also is a grievous evil— exactly as a man is born, thus will he die. So, what is the advantage to him who toils for the wind? ¹⁷ Throughout his life *he* also eats in darkness with great vexation, sickness and anger.

⁵ In the field, or making bricks, or building houses, etc.

Part of the curse of wealth is the evil that is found in hoarding the riches. It harms the wealthy man. Suppose the wealthy man loses his riches through a bad investment and has nothing to pass on to his son. He is cursed. In the context of this book, it is just as meaningless to have wealth and have something to pass on to a son. To Solomon, it is better not to have anything than to have had something and then to have lost it. However, Solomon expresses a different opinion in the Proverbs.

Proverbs 13:22 A good man leaves an inheritance to his children's children, and the wealth of the sinner is stored up for the righteous.

In Ecclesiastes, Solomon is painting a picture of how man thinks when God is not in his life. In Proverbs, Solomon is painting a picture of the godly man. For the godless man, there is no advantage in laboring hard to have wealth. Whether we work hard or not, whether we have or have not, neither matters because all are born and die. Solomon calls it a grievous evil to work hard for wealth. The only things acquired from hard work are vexation, sickness, and anger. Hard work is worthless. Hard work is senseless. Hard work offers no advantage because we cannot take the results of our labor with us after death. So is the plight of man without God.

Evil Drink and Eat – The Reward

Ecclesiastes 5:18 Here is what I have seen to be good and fitting: to eat, to drink and enjoy oneself in all one's labor in which he toils under the sun *during* the few years of his life which God has given him; for this is his reward.

Since we can't take the fruit of our labor with us when we die, we should "eat, drink, and be merry" while we can. There is no other reward for man. Man's only reward is in the here and now. God has given us only a few years to find happiness, so we must seek it now.

Evil Wealth from Labor – The Reward

Ecclesiastes 5:19 Furthermore, as for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth, He has also empowered him to eat from them and to receive his reward and rejoice in his labor; this is the gift of God. ²⁰For he will not often consider the years of his life, because God keeps him occupied with the gladness of his heart.

Continuing with the same thought, the gift of God for the rich person is simply to enjoy that wealth. Doing so then consumes his life and he is totally occupied with "the gladness of his heart" in that wealth. It is God's gift to the man of the world who does not consider the passing days and years of his life and it is his reward in this life because there is no reward after death.

The Soul Lacks Nothing

Ecclesiastes 6:1 There is an evil which I have seen under the sun and it is prevalent among men—²a man to whom God has given riches and wealth and honor so that his soul lacks nothing of all that he desires, but God has not empowered him to eat from them, for a foreigner enjoys them. This is vanity and a severe affliction. ³If a man fathers a hundred *children* and lives many years, however many they be, but his soul is not satisfied with good things, and he does not even have a *proper* burial, *then* I say, "Better the miscarriage than he," ⁴for it comes in futility and goes into obscurity; and its name is covered in obscurity. ⁵"It never sees the sun and it never knows *anything*; it is better off than he." ⁶"Even if the *other* man lives a thousand years twice and does not enjoy good things—do not all go to one place?" ⁷All a man's labor is for his mouth and yet the appetite is not satisfied.

All the riches in the world are no good to a man once he has died. He can no longer eat from those riches and someone else will enjoy the results of his labor. If those who inherit his riches do not give him a proper burial, then it would have been better for the rich man never to have lived and toiled on earth in the godless man's

mind. It would have been better for him to have been miscarried before birth. Why does man think like this? It is because the rich man ends up without a legacy. One day he will die and return to the dust like every other man. In a generation or two, the man will be forgotten and never thought of again. All go to the same place, rich or poor, wicked or evil; there is no difference. It is a sad commentary on the way man thinks about life and God's creation. It is not God's thoughts, it is not God's teaching, it is not God's revelation. It is man's thoughts that are conjured up in his worldly meditation.

The Soul and Its Desire

Ecclesiastes 6:8 For what advantage does the wise man have over the fool? What *advantage* does the poor man have, knowing *how* to walk before the living? ⁹What the eyes see is better than what the soul desires. This too is futility and a striving after wind.

How we live does not matter in Solomon's opinion. Rich or poor, it does not matter because there is no advantage in being either rich or poor. The only thing that matters is how we look, how we are perceived from our appearance. It does not matter what happens inside the heart and the soul. What something looks like is more important than what the soul desires.

Who Knows What is Good?

Ecclesiastes 6:10 Whatever exists has already been named, and it is known what man is; for he cannot dispute with him who is stronger than he is. ¹¹For there are many words which increase futility. What *then* is the advantage to a man? ¹²For who knows what is good for a man during *his* lifetime, *during* the few years of his futile life? He will spend them like a shadow. For who can tell a man what will be after him under the sun?

Because there is nothing new under the sun and everything has already existed in some form before, it is useless for a man to try to change anything. Traditions are strong and difficult to change and it is futile for man to try to change anything with a multitude of words and speech. His years are just too short in this life to make a difference. His days are but a shadow. When he is gone, will things change? No promises can be made about the future. Man cannot do anything today that is promised to last after he is dead. It is worthless to ponder such thoughts. It is all emptiness. It is the way a man without God thinks about life, in Solomon's mind.