

ECCLESIASTES 6

ANOTHER ILLUSTRATION OF VANITY

In this chapter, the royal Preacher continues his theme. He had just finished speaking, at the end of chapter 5, of the wealthy man to whom God gives power to enjoy his wealth. Now he passes on to sketch the opposite picture of a rich man who has an abundance of everything that he can desire; but for some reason or another, he does not have the capacity of enjoying his own possessions. He is none the happier for all his wealth. Perhaps he is also childless; and when he dies, someone else comes into the enjoyment of those things from which he himself had obtained no happiness. But even if he should have a hundred children and grandchildren, and even if he lived to be twice the age of Methuselah; yet if his soul is not filled with good, and he has no burial – the Preacher says that a stillborn child is better than him. And even if the life of this rich man was indefinitely prolonged, what would be the value of his existence, since it would bring him no lasting good? The life of this unhappy rich man is a meaningless failure, and it ends in the grave at last. Surely such a rich man in his gilded misery – even with a long life and many children – is to be pitied rather than envied.

The wise man proceeds to speak of the unsatisfied nature of human desires in general. “All the labor of man is for his mouth, and yet the appetite is not filled.” All human toil is intended to meet the various cravings of human nature; and yet somehow or another, human nature refuses to be satisfied. And in this respect, the wise man has no advantage over the fool, nor the poor man over the rich. All people have desires which cannot be truly fulfilled with the things of this world. It would be better for men if they would simply enjoy what comes within “the sight of the eyes” – that is, those blessings of the present, which God is already giving them – instead of losing the present by indulging “the wandering of the desire” after imaginary happinesses, which they think they might obtain through some possible combination of circumstances. It is the never-satisfied craving of human nature that leads to these experiments which end in “vanity and feeding on wind.” There are certain permanent conditions of human existence which have been ordained by the Almighty, and which no mortal flesh can alter. Man is and always will be a creature of the dust, and such a frail creature cannot contend with the Mighty One. And even if a person succeeds in getting this or that thing which he desires, he or she is not necessarily the better for it. The very things which our desires wander after, and which we think will make us happy, may contain no real good for us.

So we have seen some of the considerations which the Preacher presents to us as antidotes to covetousness. We cannot deny that he brings us face-to-face

Outline of the chapter:

- ❖ The royal preacher continues to show the vanity of worldly wealth – verses 1-10
- ❖ He concludes that it is folly to hope to make our happiness in the things of this world, and that our satisfaction must be in the next life – verses 11-12

with facts which are well-worth pondering! There is a glitter about wealth which easily dazzles us and leads us astray. Jesus speaks of the “deceitfulness of riches.” And this deceitfulness may cheat both the rich and the poor by filling them with discontentment, and by giving them unreal visions of a happiness which they imagine themselves excluded from. Therefore, let us be on guard against the twin vices



of envy and greed, by refusing to think too highly of wealth. This does not mean that we need to despise earthly comforts, nor must we scorn circumstances which – when rightly used – may make our lives easier. But it is of the utmost importance that we should open our eyes to the simple fact that wealth has its drawbacks as well as its advantages, and its burdens as well as its privileges; and that it is often a curse to its possessor, instead of a blessing.

We must also remember that covetousness is one of the most dangerous of all vices, in its power to harden the heart and to rob life of its sweetest and noblest elements. We may venture to affirm that amidst the simple blessings and circumstances of life, it is possible for a person to live just as honorably and happily as if he were in a position of wealth and luxury. If someone becomes a money-worshiper, it is not merely the teaching of Solomon that he despises; he turns away from the Spirit of Christ! Even the pagan stoic, Seneca, said that “it is shameful to depend for a happy life on silver and gold.” But the Gospel of Jesus goes much further than the self-centered teachings of stoicism, for He inspires men, women, and children with power to govern their desires and rule their fleshly appetites. Man cannot contend with God, but he can live as a child of God! He may legitimately seek to better his position in life; but he is not to set his heart on this goal, as if it were the “one thing needful” – to be obtained at all costs and hazards. It is true that he does need food and clothing, but he does not need riches and luxury. If he is supplied with the ordinary necessities and simple comforts of life, and if his soul is garrisoned by the forces of love and duty; then he may well resist the assaults of envy and greed. Hence Paul could say, “I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therein to be content!” “Self-sufficing” is the word that he uses – the very word that a stoic would have penned. “I know how to be abased, and I know also how to abound,” says Paul; “in everything and in all things have I learned the secret both to be filled and to be hungry, both to abound and to be in want.” We might almost imagine that we were listening to one of the old teachers of the stoics, until we hear Paul’s further words: “I can do all things in him that strengtheneth me!” “*In him that strengtheneth me*” – that is the thought which prevents a manly independence from passing into an unnatural asceticism and an inhumane pride!

Lord, we repent of our sins of envy, greed, and discontentment. Help us to be content in all of life’s circumstances, whether we are in abundance or poverty. Amen.