

That last verse is at the heart of what the Preacher wants you to understand:

“For who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain life,  
which he passes like a shadow?  
For who can tell man what will be after him under the sun?”

*You* are not God.

*You* cannot control your own circumstances –  
much less what will come after you!  
So don't get stressed out about the future.

Just shut up and enjoy it!

Our passage begins and ends with the importance of “few words.”

It is better to be silent and be *thought* a fool,  
than to open your mouth and remove all doubt.

Our passage tonight begins and ends with the importance of frugality of speech!

Whether with respect to vows and worship (at the beginning)  
or with respect to community disputes (at the end)  
“the more words, the more vanity.”

And one more preliminary comment:

The word “good” (tov) is used 51 times in Ecclesiastes.  
But when used in the plural,  
the word means “good things” or “goods”  
We see it four times in our passage tonight:

5:11 – “When goods increase...”

5:18 – “to find enjoyment...” –  
actually reads “to see good things”

6:3 – “his soul is not satisfied with life's good things”

6:6 – “even though he should live a thousand years twice over, yet enjoy no good” –  
actually “no good things”

So if you put these two aspects of our passage together,  
the point of these two chapters is simply “shut up and enjoy life!”

I think sometimes we try too hard to “spiritualize” everything.

You will do no good by trying to be hyper-spiritual all the time.  
Sometimes, the best thing you can do for the kingdom of God  
is simply “shut up and enjoy life”!

The Preacher starts us off with the temple in verses 1-7.

How should you think about going to worship?

## 1. Worship (5:1-7)

### a. God Is in Heaven and You Are on Earth. Therefore Let Your Words Be Few (v1-3)

*Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they are doing evil.*

The basic picture here is of the temple in Jerusalem,  
where all Israelites would go to bring their sacrifices.

The Preacher urges us to “draw near to listen.”

The priest in the temple would read from the scriptures.

The Preacher says that we need to listen to the Word of God.

Listen to what God says.

His word brings life.

And he says that to draw near to *listen* is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools.

The “sacrifice of fools” looks exactly like everyone else’s sacrifice.

The difference is not in the animal – but in the person who is bringing the animal.

God spoke through the prophets,

“These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.”

The fool draws near – but doesn’t *listen*.

This morning I quoted from the Larger Catechism on preaching.

The Larger Catechism also has a very helpful statement on *listening*:

#### **Q. 160. What is required of those that hear the Word preached?**

A. It is required of those that hear the Word preached, that they attend upon it with diligence, preparation, and prayer; examine what they hear by the Scriptures; receive the truth with faith, love, meekness, and readiness of mind, as the Word of God; meditate, and confer of it; hide it in their hearts, and bring forth the fruit of it in their lives.

In verse 2, the problem is not the *content* of what is said before God.

<sup>2</sup> <sup>[b]</sup> *Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few.*

As you see in the subsequent verses,

the problem is that people are *saying* that they will do what is right –  
but they aren’t *doing it!*

This is always a danger for churches that use written prayers and creeds.

We make you say words before God.

If you don’t mean it – then you shouldn’t say it!

That's part of why I include the whole liturgy in the weekly pastoral notes!  
Some people really need to think and reflect on what they are going to say –  
so they find it helpful to use those prayers and songs during the week.

Of course, this is not a danger unique to churches that use written prayers and creeds.  
After all, any church that has congregational singing  
makes you say words before God!  
If you sing praises to God and sing how much you love God –  
and then you go home and blow up at your wife and kids –  
then you have uttered rash and hasty words – when you said that you love God!

In verse 3, the Preacher explains why he urges restraint in our words:

<sup>3</sup> *For a dream comes with much business, and a fool's voice with many words.*

The word for dream is just an ordinary word meaning “dream.”  
A dream *can be* a way that God communicates with people.  
There are lots of examples of dreams in the OT – and a couple in the NT.

But how do you know when it is God?

People sometimes say that they wish that God would communicate more that way.  
But Hebrews 1:1 points out that such methods were inferior:

“Long ago, at many times and in many ways,  
God spoke to our fathers by the prophets,  
but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son,  
whom he appointed the heir of all things.”

Tertullian, in his 3<sup>rd</sup> century treatise “On the Soul”  
talks about how God tends to use dreams to call people to himself,  
but once they come to faith, he doesn't use dreams,  
because we have a better form of revelation in the scriptures.

After all, consider what Ecclesiastes says about dreams:

“For a dream comes with *much business*.”

This idea of “business” has to do with occupation or labor  
it's the “evil business of 1:13 or 5:14.

And again in verse 7,  
“When dreams increase and words grow many, there is vanity.”

Yes, it is true, that God can communicate *something* through dreams.  
But when dreams increase –  
not *all* dreams come from God –  
and if you get fixated on dreams you will over-interpret them.

Indeed, you might start making vows based on dreams...

But God is the one you must fear.

And therefore, the Preacher urges you to make sure that you...

**b. Pay Your Vows – But Don't Vow Very Often (v4-7)**

<sup>4</sup> When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow. <sup>5</sup> It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. <sup>6</sup> Let not your mouth lead you<sup>[c]</sup> into sin, and do not say before the messenger<sup>[d]</sup> that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry at your voice and destroy the work of your hands? <sup>7</sup> For when dreams increase and words grow many, there is vanity;<sup>[e]</sup> but<sup>[f]</sup> God is the one you must fear.

There are clear quotations and allusions here to Deuteronomy 23:22-24, and Numbers 15:22-31.

The Law was very clear.

When you make a vow, you must fulfill it.

Meredith M. Kline points out that

Vows were pleas to God with no guarantee of fulfillment  
to produce or preserve life in the context of the first, temporal death  
(for example, reproductive death for Hannah  
or impending military death for Jephthah).

Qohelet teaches in 5:4-5 that despite the seeming distance of a deity  
whose providence is inscrutable,

God may personally and immanently provide requested life for the earthly "dead."

Qohelet's framework implies the wise should appeal to the gracious deliverer  
for heavenly life that transcends and transforms  
the death-dominated earthly realm  
and enables one not only to fear the divine judge  
and keep his commandments  
but to love the heavenly savior and obey his commands. [Kline]

Jesus talks about this when he says "let your yes be yes and your no be no" –

People were saying that they didn't need to live up to their word  
because they didn't swear an oath – they just said "yes."

Jesus' point is that as soon as you say 'yes' you are bound to do it!

An oath is not sinful –

rather, *breaking your word* is sinful!

I want you to think about what the Preacher is doing with this section on worship.

The Preacher doesn't talk about worship very much.

But when he does, notice that his focus is on 'de-centering' the self.

(Rather like how Paul does this in 1 Cor 13!)

God is in heaven and you are on earth.

God is the one you must fear.

Draw near to *listen*.

Don't think of *worship* as something to "check off" your list of "things to do this week."

The Preacher does not give us the final answer here.

But probably, it's safe to say,

the answer will only be found by someone who draws near to God *to listen*.

Our second section deals with wealth.

## **2. Wealth (5:8-20)**

We start with two benefits – two good things:

### **a. Two Benefits (5:8-12)**

#### **i. A King Committed to Cultivated Fields (v8-9)**

<sup>8</sup> *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.* <sup>9</sup> *But this is gain for a land in every way: a king committed to cultivated fields.*

Why is a king supposed to be committed to cultivated fields?

The issue is property rights.

God had given the land as an inheritance to Israel.

Each family had its own proper portion.

If there is corruption and oppression –  
then the poor will lose their land.

Deuteronomy spoke of how this would result in Israel being sent into exile.

Therefore, a king committed to cultivated fields –

in other words, a king who devotes himself to justice and equity  
in the matter of property –

is a gain for the land!

Now, remember what we saw last time in the matter of "righteousness and justice."

Righteousness has to do with how your society is organized.

Justice has to do with the exercise of law.

What do you do if the *land* was unrighteously obtained?

Those who control the land *obviously* want to see their "property rights" maintained!

The conflicts in Ukraine and Israel are important examples of this.

South Africa has tried to wrestle with the question of how to remedy  
an inequitable distribution of the land.

When the United States freed the slaves,

there were all sorts of problems with “property rights”!

The Preacher does not answer those questions for us.

But he does say that the *king* should be concerned for these matters.

## **ii. The Sweet Sleep of a Laborer (v10-12)**

The second benefit is the sweet sleep of a laborer.

If you work hard, you sleep well.

But if you love money – then you will not be satisfied with money!

*<sup>10</sup> He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income; this also is vanity. <sup>11</sup> When goods increase, they increase who eat them, and what advantage has their owner but to see them with his eyes? <sup>12</sup> Sweet is the sleep of a laborer, whether he eats little or much, but the full stomach of the rich will not let him sleep.*

As Jesus said, “No man can serve two masters...you cannot serve both God and money.”

Our society is obsessed with obtaining “stuff.”

We often pride ourselves that we are “not like” those materialistic people out there – but who are we kidding?!

Our kids have so many toys,  
all they can do with most of them is “see them with their eyes”!

These obsessions will only destroy us!

And this is the point of the two grievous evils in verses 13-17.

## **b. Two Grievous Evils (5:13-17)**

### **i. Riches Lost in a Bad Venture (v13-15)**

*<sup>13</sup> There is a grievous evil that I have seen under the sun: riches were kept by their owner to his hurt, <sup>14</sup> and those riches were lost in a bad venture. And he is father of a son, but he has nothing in his hand. <sup>15</sup> As he came from his mother's womb he shall go again, naked as he came, and shall take nothing for his toil that he may carry away in his hand.*

First, you have “riches lost in a bad venture” – again we have our “evil business” popping up.

### **ii. No Gain for His Toil (v16-17)**

*<sup>16</sup> 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? <sup>17</sup> Moreover, all his days he eats in darkness in much vexation and sickness and anger.*

And second, he has no gain for his toil.

You can hear echoes of Job in these two “grievous evils”:

“naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return” (Job 1:21)

Job certainly ate in darkness in much vexation and sickness and anger.

What's the point of all our work?

What gain is there?

(Do you hear echoes of Jesus' words, "What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world, but forfeits his soul"?)

Jesus plainly reflected on the lessons of Ecclesiastes!

The word "behold" in v18 signals that we should stop and look at what the Preacher is saying:

**c. The Gift of God: Accept Your Lot and Rejoice in Your Toil (5:18-20)**

<sup>18</sup> *Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment<sup>[h]</sup> 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.*

Verse 18 simply repeats what we heard at the end of chapter 2.

But verses 19-20 now add a little more:

<sup>19</sup> *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.* <sup>20</sup> *For he will not much remember the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart.*

If God has given you wealth and possessions *and the power* to enjoy them,  
*and to accept your lot in life and rejoice in your toil –*

wow!

You are a unique person!

This is the gift of God.

And, because God keeps you occupied with joy in your heart,  
you won't remember much about your life!

Good times.

There's usually not much to remember about good times.

You did your work, you enjoyed God's blessing and bounty,  
and you don't have much more to remember!

It's the *hard times* that we always remember!

The *evil business!*

And that's where we turn in chapter 6:

**3. Appetite (6:1-12)**

**a. An Abundant Evil – A Man Who Has Everything, But Does Not Enjoy It (v1-6)**

*6 There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, and it lies heavy on mankind: <sup>2</sup> 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.*

Notice that this is the exact opposite of the good gift of God in 5:19.

If God gives you all the good things of this life –  
but doesn't give you the power to enjoy them:

*This is vanity,<sup>[i]</sup> it is a grievous evil.*

The Preacher turns to hyperbole and exaggeration in verses 3-6:

*<sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> For it comes in vanity and goes in darkness, and in darkness its name is covered. <sup>5</sup> Moreover, it has not seen the sun or known anything, yet it finds rest rather than he. <sup>6</sup> Even though he should live a thousand years twice over, yet enjoy<sup>[i]</sup> no good—do not all go to the one place?*

You could have a hundred children, and live for 2,000 years –  
but if your soul is not satisfied with life's good things,  
*and also he has no burial!*  
in other words, the Preacher has just joined two entirely opposite worlds together!

Normally, it is the stillborn child who has no burial – no tomb.  
A wealthy man who lived for 2,000 years and had 100 children  
would certainly have a tomb!

But take all these extremes together.  
What do you get?  
Everyone dies.

And so the Preacher points us to the problem in verse 7

### **b. Why Not? “Wandering Appetites” (v7-9)**

*<sup>7</sup> All the toil of man is for his mouth, yet his appetite is not satisfied.<sup>[k]</sup>*

Have you ever had a meal that was really satisfying?  
How long did it last?  
Eight hours?  
Maybe 12 hours – if you slept for most of that!

Our appetites are never satisfied.  
We always want more!

And so the Preacher asks:

*<sup>8</sup> 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?*



The Preacher recognizes that wisdom is better than folly –  
and if you know how to conduct yourself before the living –  
then you have an advantage in life.

But if we're all going to die – then *what advantage is that, really?*

<sup>9</sup> *Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the appetite: this also is vanity and a striving after wind.*

And so the Preacher concludes this section by going back to the theme where he started in ch 5:

**c. So Don't Waste Your Words (v10-12)**

<sup>10</sup> *Whatever has come to be has already been named, and it is known what man is, and that he is not able to dispute with one stronger than he.* <sup>11</sup> *The more words, the more vanity, and what is the advantage to man?* <sup>12</sup> *For who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain<sup>[U]</sup> life, which he passes like a shadow? For who can tell man what will be after him under the sun?*

The end of chapter 6 connects back to the beginning of chapter 5 –  
“let your words be few” (5:2)  
“the more words, the more vanity” (6:11)

As you stand before God, you should be circumspect –  
think carefully before you vow to do something.

In the same way, as you stand before man –  
and particularly as you stand before one who is stronger than you –  
think carefully before you dispute with him!

But also verses 10-12 are setting us up for chapter 7.

We saw that the Preacher came to a tentative conclusion in chapter 2.  
Since then, he has complicated things a bit,  
so he will come back and provide a little more nuance in chapter 7,  
as he reaches his *second* tentative conclusion!

Tonight, the Preacher wants you to seriously reconsider your love affair with your appetites.  
If you pursue your appetites – then you will never enjoy your lot in life.

Oh, you might think so – but as C. S. Lewis said it well in “The Weight of Glory”:

“We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition  
when infinite joy is offered us,  
like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum  
because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea.

*We are far too easily pleased.”* (quoted in Eswine, 77).

Zack Eswine points out that the Preacher is trying to do two things here:

First, he wants us to see that even the wise use of created joys “cannot spare us from what happens under the sun. The wise will die just like the fool. Even if one wisely turns from mud pies to God, life under the sun will not necessarily reward them for it. Neither the foolish use of sex nor the proper enjoyment of it can save us...”

“Second, the Preacher wants us to feel sad about this. He wants us to see how far from Eden we have come....Now, even though we are surrounded by opportunities to laugh, or drink, or work, or make money, none of it is enough, we are not satisfied, and death stomps on all of it.” (Eswine, 77)

Close with Psalm 66 – entering God’s presence joyfully to pay vows!