

September 8, 2019  
Sunday Evening Service  
Series: Ecclesiastes  
Community Baptist Church  
643 S. Suber Road  
Greer, SC 29650  
© 2019 David J. Whitcomb

## To Ponder . . .

Questions to ponder as you prepare to hear from Ecclesiastes 5.

1. What is entailed in how we approach God in silence?
2. List some of God's attributes that should encourage us to listen to Him.
3. How much time do you spend meditating on what God says?
4. Have you ever made a vow to God and not kept it?
5. Explain how disappointing wealth can be.
6. Compared to the rest of the world, would you consider yourself well off?
7. How do you handle your prosperity?

### **RESPECT GOD, NOT WEALTH OR HONOR** **Ecclesiastes 5:1-20**

The longer we live, the more likely it is that we will experience pendulum swings in various aspects of life. One such swing is fresh on my mind based on an article I read the other day. According to *The Atlantic*, March 6, 2019, there is a swing beginning in educational preferences. In my generation, the "Baby Boomers," it was not uncommon for students in colleges and universities to be the first generation in their family to attend. It was a pendulum swing away

from factory work and farming, to the professions. By the time we came to "Generation X" and their children, who we affectionately called Millennials, it was generally expected that they would pursue higher education at a traditional liberal arts school.

On one hand, those generations pursued the professions such as business, education, law, medicine, and such. On the other hand, the liberal arts education ended up being mostly liberal, somewhat "artsy," but short on preparation for real life.

Now according to the article in *the Atlantic* the Post Millennials, also know as Generation Z, who were born beginning in 1997, are entering post-secondary education. But here is where the pendulum is swinging again. Many of these young people are not interested in living out their lives stressed out in an office building being a "professional." Many are opting to learn trades, hone skills, and buy up opportunities in the booming arena of technology. It is also interesting that many of these kids are not wrapped up in grabbing for all the stuff they can get in both hands but are satisfied to "get along."

So which is right? Which is best? Solomon, who was just a bit wealthy himself, experimented with all aspects of life. He looked for satisfaction everywhere, in every crook and cranny of life and concluded that only God satisfies. It really doesn't matter whether God saddles you with wealth like He did Job, Abraham, and Solomon, or God directs for you to live just getting along. God, and God alone, is still the focus that brings satisfaction to life. Paul, who had lived on both ends of the spectrum, confessed to his friends in Philippi, "*Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content*" (*Philippians 4:11*).

The key to satisfaction in life is to do the best you can with what God gives you every day. Each day we should be diligent and wise with all of God's blessings and end the day saying in our hearts, *Whether I ate or drank or whatever I did, I did it all to the glory of God* (*1 Corinthians 10:31*).

### **Respect God (vv.1-8).**

In this vain life it is best to be still and know God (vv.1-3). The preacher concluded in his experiment with life that we should approach God to listen. He has already given us several good reasons

for that kind of a respectful approach to God. He learned that God determines what we do (1:13; 3:10), that God determines life (2:24), that God determines rewards in life (2:26). Solomon discovered that God makes everything according to His standard of beautiful, and yet humans struggle to comprehend Him (3:11). Furthermore, whatever God does endures forever (3:14). And ultimately, God is in heaven, controls all things, is the eternal judge (3:15-17; 5:2).

With this understanding of God's greatness and majesty, how should we approach Him? We commented in our study on chapter four that God was not mentioned at all. Now the contrast to that absence of mention of God is found in chapter five, the most thoroughly God-centered chapter in the book, where we find God mentioned seven times (if we include the pronoun "He" in v.4).

The first part of this chapter is all about our relationship with God who is Master of everything. Because God is so majestic, Solomon warned his peers to be careful when they approach God. God is in His temple. Listen when He speaks. Israelites in Solomon's day would go to the temple to worship. Solomon warned that when they did, they needed to *guard your steps when you go to the house of God (v.1a)*.

God called the temple His house and the people understood that. The psalms often refer to the temple and tabernacle as the "House of the Lord." Jesus reminded the thieves and merchants of that when He drove them out of the temple. When people desired to approach God, they went to the temple. That is the background to the common practice of the Israelites taking a sacrifice to the temple.

In that setting, Solomon warned that *To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they are doing evil (v.1b)*. Offering a sacrifice would have been an expression of their gratitude to God, confession of sin, commitment or oath. In this case, the sacrifice is identified by the Hebrew word *zeba*. Therefore, the preacher's reference to a sacrifice would not be a reference to a sacrifice we often think of, the one that was consumed on the altar. Rather, this was a kind of sacrifice to be eaten by the family in a festive gathering, as in the Passover. And so the warning makes great sense. In that festive gathering, there was a danger of the fool getting out of control, not being wise enough to know that he is acting unacceptable before God's holy presence.

Far better to draw near to God to listen. Typically, in this kind of setting, the sacrifice would be offered in silence focusing on God's holy character. An attitude like that experienced by Isaiah, when he had the vision of God's holiness in the temple, was expected at the offering. Then the law of God regarding the sacrifices would be read by the priest. That was to hear from God. Then there would be praise to God in song or in prayer. After that came the festivity and rejoicing.

Therefore, the preacher's advice is for us to plan to approach God with the purpose of hearing first. Hear God speak from His Word to His glory and majesty. Hear God speak from His Word to our need. Then we know how to pray and how to praise Him.

In contrast to what we should do, the second verse warns us of the danger that much talk leads to foolishness. Therefore, we should be careful to weigh our words. *Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God (v.2a)*. Hastiness of spirit is always a bad choice. Some of us are that way by nature. To compound the problem, we are encouraged by our culture to be quick to answer, quick to offer our opinions.

But a hasty spirit is not wise because it typically results in a rash mouth. The root to this Hebrew word translated "rash" is always negative in the Old Testament. It speaks of trouble or disaster. Rash words are words we should not speak, words we have not thought about, and words that do damage.

We must not miss the importance of the context of this warning. It is given in the context of practicing prayer. The danger of an unchecked, careless spirit in praying to God is that we will show disrespect for His character and person. It is possible in that kind of attitude for us to speak heresy, make false accusation of God's person and motives, or blurt out our misunderstandings. Some modern authors encourage us to pour out our frustrations to God without any concern about what we say. Yes, there are examples of God's choice servants expressing frustration with God's will. But a fleshly response is not the best response to God. Better for us to quiet our hearts, which results in a quiet mouth.

The quiet heart also results in a careful mouth that respects God's position. We stop to think that *God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few (v.2b)*. Jesus' lesson about

how to pray begins with this reminder. He taught that when we pray we should say, “*Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name*” (*Matthew 6:9*). It is a good reminder of His holy nature and of our need to weigh our thoughts and words as we pray.

Furthermore, the preacher teaches us to slow down and meditate. *For a dream comes with much business, and a fool’s voice with many words (v.3)*. A dream is a plan, a vision, an idea, not the same as a nightmare. Dreams and plans require much business of mind as well as body. Some of us come by this very naturally and tend toward over-thinking and over-planning. As a whole, our society is so given to “much business” that we think it is both normal and commendable to be worn to a frazzle.

In this example of Hebrew poetry, the first phrase must be parallel to the second. The contrast is that a fool speaks much but does little. We might call it words without substance. Therefore, dreams and plans flow out of much business. But sometimes we wonder what actually gets accomplished. It has often been said that a creative person must work with a “nuts and bolts” person or nothing will be accomplished. I have seen far too many “good ideas” stay on paper! But the point here is, “Don’t try to squeeze God into your busy schedule.” He doesn’t need an appointment, nor does He deserve one. You and I are not in charge. He is. Slow down, be quiet, hear Him speak through His Word, then pray to Him and praise Him.

Second, when we approach God in prayer and sacrifice, we need to do what we promised (vv.4-8). This is to guard our mouths from sin. Sin is a very real possibility according to God’s rule about vows. Solomon warned, *When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow. It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay (vv.4-5)*.

It was common for Israelites to make vows to God. A person might make a vow to do something, as when Jacob vowed to give God a tithe if God brought him back safely (*Genesis 28:20*). Or a vow could be the promise to not to do something as when David vowed not to go to bed until he figured out how to build a house for the ark of God (*Psalms 132:2*). Or a vow could be a promised act in return for God’s favor. In *Numbers 21:1*, we read how the nation of Israel vowed to completely destroy King Arad’s kingdom if God gave them victory over the king. Or a more familiar scenario would be

something like a Nazirite vow (*Numbers 6:2*), an expression of devotion.

It was not a sin to make a vow or to not make a vow. The sin was to articulate a promise to God and then not keep it. The sin is explained by Solomon’s practical ramifications of the rule. *Let not your mouth lead you into sin, and do not say before the messenger that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry at your voice and destroy the work of your hands?* Again, the sin was to vow and not do what you promised to do. The danger is that when the time to pay comes, human nature responds, “Oh, I was just kidding.” Solomon warned the people not to say that to the priest. It is most likely that the priest would be the *messenger* mentioned here. Or it is also possible that God’s angels (*mal-awk* is often translated “angel”) are witness to our promises. Whoever the messengers are, the fact remains that God promised to judge our failure to keep our vows.

Therefore, it is the character of God’s people to be able to make commitments and keep commitments. David wrote, *O LORD, who shall sojourn in your tent? Who shall dwell on your holy hill? He who walks blamelessly and does what is right and speaks truth in his heart; who does not slander with his tongue and does no evil to his neighbor, nor takes up a reproach against his friend; in whose eyes a vile person is despised, but who honors those who fear the LORD; who swears to his own hurt and does not change (Psalm 15:1-4)*.

Approach God to hear first. Be careful about what you promise and do what you vowed. All of that is part of the larger practice to fear God. We are more likely to make wise commitments and keep our commitments when we have a right relationship with God. We will have a right relationship with God when we understand His position.

Fearing God is not the most popular practice. However, if we come to an honest acknowledgment of the reality of life, we will be more likely to fear Him. Life is about making plans, talking about goals and dreams, and it all comes to naught in the end. *For when dreams increase and words grow many, there is vanity (v.7a)*. Okay, we know that is true. In that context, the acceptable thing is to put God first. Yes, life is busy. Yes, we need to make plans, set goals, dream dreams. But in all of that, *God is the one you must fear (v.7b)*.

He created us to maintain a right view of and relationship with Him. That kind of respect and accountability is demonstrated all throughout life. *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 (v.8)*. Authorities oversee lesser authorities to assure that justice is done. But God is the ultimate authority. Fear Him. Demonstrate that fear by hearing Him and keeping your commitment to Him.

### **No Satisfaction in Wealth (vv.9-14).**

A good rule for life is “Work hard and rest in God” (vv.9-12). It is good to work hard. But even in that there are restrictions and limitations. Solomon learned that a ruler who encourages use of natural resources is a blessing. *But this is gain for a land in every way: a king committed to cultivated fields (v.9)*. When a king hoards resources, the whole kingdom suffers. God gave us the creation to keep, work, maintain for our own good and blessings. Some people in our culture do not understand that principle. They fear that any use of the earth will deplete it for future generations. Of course those folks view life apart from God, with no hope of God keeping His promises. They are trying to preserve passing things because, they believe, the future is all up to them. The difference between preservationists and conservationists is that conservationists take responsibility to manage the land, while a preservationist thinks it best to not touch the land.

Flowing out of the argument about blessings on earth, Solomon offered three warnings about focusing on wealth that lends balance. First is the reality that money does not satisfy. *He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income; this also is vanity (v.10)*. This is not some kind of magical or mystical principle. The reality is that our soul cannot be fully satisfied with anything that appeals to our flesh. Our soul can only be satisfied with God.

Second, Solomon warned that liabilities increase in proportion to gain. *When goods increase, they increase who eat them, and what advantage has their owner but to see them with his eyes? (v.11)*. The

general rule is that when you come into wealth, your friends and family increases. Not to mention taxes!

Third, wealth does not guarantee rest. *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 (v.12)*. The poor, common laborer sleeps well regardless of how much he possesses. The idea behind the words *little or much to eat* is a picture of limited wealth. We should not feel sorry for the person with limited wealth because the laborer who is generally unimportant goes to sleep and rests. The psalmists had learned, *It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives to his beloved sleep (Psalm 127:2)*.

Conversely, it is the rich man who suffers with insomnia. Having a safe full of gold in your closet will not cause you to sleep soundly. It will keep you up nights worrying about it. The implication is that all his possessions, which make life comfortable, also cause stress. Who is more stressed out, the common laborer or the owner of the company? Both need to rest in God, allow Him to be the controller, and get some sleep.

It helps if we remember the harsh reality of life at the end (vv.13-17). You can't take it with you. And even while we are alive, wealth can actually cause us agony. Solomon said, *There is a grievous evil that I have seen under the sun: riches were kept by their owner to his hurt (v.13)*. Wealth often leads to a carefree lifestyle, but sin that has consequences. Or a person can become a miser, lose friends, and even lose his health.

Another agony with wealth is that it can be lost so easily. There are times when *those riches were lost in a bad venture. And he is father of a son, but he has nothing in his hand (v.14)*. This happens often and easily through bad investments that are driven by greed. Here is the person who has the ability to make money but no ability to manage it. And going through piles of money, he has nothing to leave his children.

As if those risks are not discouraging enough, Solomon reminds us that at the end of the road, everything is left behind. *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 (v.15)*.

That is a sad reality. But worse is the reality that you can't enjoy it while you are here in life either. *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 (v.16)?* We go out of this world with exactly as much as we brought into this world – nothing. Ultimately, toiling for stuff is toiling to grab wind. And along the way we deal with moral, physical, emotional darkness, poor health, and anger because life is not fair. *Moreover, all his days he eats in darkness in much vexation and sickness and anger (v.17).*

### **God's Plan (vv.18-20).**

We come to the end of the chapter to discover some very good news. God's plan for us relating to Him and our possessions in life is a good plan. He desires for us to eat, drink, and be happy. God wants us to enjoy the fruits of our labor. *Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink (v.18a).* There is a lifestyle that is different from the sad, discouraging, never satisfied, chasing-after-passing-things kind of life. The distinct kind of life is built on right relationships. Relationships sit behind the words "eat and drink." That is a picture of right relationships with others, which begin with our right relationship with God.

God also desires for us to enjoy our labor. He tells us through Solomon to *find enjoyment 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 (v.18b).* This is the life of joy **in all the toil**. God does not commend joy out of toil, away from toil, in the absence of toil. That is what faulty humans recommend. Enjoying life while we toil is a life that recognizes God's authority to control all that is given. This kind of life learns to rejoice in the life God gives.

The joyful life accepts the lot God has given. It understands God's gift. *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 (v.19).* We need to learn and accept the fact that wealth and possessions come from God. Whether the recipient acknowledges the source of wealth doesn't change God's plan or power. The wise person rejoices in what God gives and how God gives it.

Therefore, we conclude with Solomon that the joyful life, the fulfilled life, has learned how to stay occupied with God. *For he will not much remember the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart (v.20).* It is foolish to labor for stuff that does not satisfy. It is foolish to lay up treasures to enjoy in the end, only to have the end come more quickly than you planned. It is wise to live every day enjoying what God has chosen to give. It is wise to be occupied with God every day.