

Fear and Futility: How We Approach Worship and Money Defines our Happiness

Ecclesiastes 5

April 24, 2016
Steve DeWitt

Ecclesiastes 5 is loosely organized around the themes of loving and fearing God versus a life of loving and living for money. This chapter is perhaps the most indicting section of Scripture against a life whose central aim is the accumulation of wealth. It doesn't start there. It starts with worship and the danger of casualness before God.

We're covering a lot of Scripture today as we are taking on the whole chapter. The first section is verses 1-7. Verse 7 gives the main point. *"God is the one you must fear."* To fear God is to reverence him above everything else. It means to take him as seriously as the majesty of his glory demands and arrange your life and decisions around him and his will.

"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. ² 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. ³ For a dream comes with much business, and a fool's voice with many words." (Ecclesiastes 5:1-3 ESV)

How to Fear God in Worship (Verses 1-7)

By listening/NOT chattering

"Guard your steps when you go to the house of God." (Verse 1) The house of God was the temple built by Solomon himself in Jerusalem. The temple represented God's presence with his people. It also was a reminder of God's holiness and man's sinfulness. The sacrifices and Levitical priesthood and the veils in the temple served as imposing visual aids of how much greater and glorious God is than us.

At least it was supposed to. Apparently there were people in Solomon's day who went to the temple to "worship" but their whole posture and attitude was very casual and chatty. They were chatty with others and chatty with God. They blathered on about their spiritual accomplishments. They jabbered about the latest news and sports. They could enter the temple courts of Almighty God, do their worship obligation, and head home largely unchanged or unchallenged by the whole experience. They were big talkers. Solomon says, be on your guard when you go to meet with God. How? By listening.

"As you enter the house of God, keep your ears open and your mouth shut." (Verse 1 NLT) We don't have a temple but we certainly have worship gatherings. Too often with some people there is a chit-chatty feel to it. We are all for authenticity and good spirits but there must be a sense of the greatness of God in our worship gatherings. How worship is led on the platform is part of it, but the most important place is the heart of the worshipers. It's in the heart where God meets with us. When we understand properly the grandeur and glory of God, we don't talk big and we don't talk much; we listen. We listen reverently to his Word. We listen as we pray. We listen in community to the confessions and testimonies of others. We aren't trying to impress people; we are too impressed with God.

What are some great ways to do this? Spend time in prayer before worship. Maybe greet those around you with Christian hospitality and then bow your head and ask God to speak to you today. Read a Psalm. Ask God to speak to your heart. Be friendly with others and reverent with God.

By remembering our place

"...for God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few." (Verse 2 ESV) Jesus urged us to start in prayer and worship, "Our Father who art in heaven." (Matthew 6:9 RSV) Yes, he is our Father but too many of us stop there. "Who art in heaven" is a reminder of the exalted status of whom we are praying to.

The psalmist asks, "What is man that you are mindful of him?" (Psalm 8:4 ESV) When we remember our place before God, we don't talk more, we talk less. We let our words be few. We think what he has to say is more important than what we have to say.

By fulfilling our vows

⁴"When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow. ⁵It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. ⁶Let 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? ⁷For when dreams increase and words grow many, there is vanity; but God is the one you must fear." (Ecclesiastes 5:4-7)

Apparently back in Solomon's day people would make negotiating-type promises to God. Maybe they needed something or were in some desperate situation. So they would vow, "God if you get me out of this then I will..." Then after the crisis has passed, they would say, well...perhaps I should reconsider. Verse 6 says people would tell the temple representative who administered gifts, *my vow was a mistake. I shouldn't have promised it so I'm not going to fulfill it.*

Of course, little has changed. People today make promises to God of all sorts IF God will take care of their problem. *God, I'll go to church every week! God, I'll start tithing more. God, I'll stop this destructive habit IF only you will do this for me!* Apparently God takes these vows much more seriously than we often do. Verse 6 says, "Let not your mouth lead you into sin." Jesus said the same, "Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No.'" (Matthew 5:37). He later says, "I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak." (Matthew 12:36)

We say so many words. We make so many promises. *I'll serve in that ministry. You can count on me! For better, for worse, for richer, for poorer...I do!* We say we'll do this or that. But for our sinful selves, all of this is retractable and renegotiable if our feelings or circumstances change.

Is there any promise you have made to God or before God that you have failed to fulfill? Verse 6 says this makes God angry and punishment is possible. I'd suggest you repent and do what you promised.

I'll give you a quick story of how I learned a lesson. When I was 18, I entered a college scholarship contest. The winner got a full year of tuition paid for. The time came to announce the winner. It was a big gathering and at the time a big deal. Right before they announced the winner, I said to God in prayer, "If I win, I'll tithe on it." I was playing let's

make a deal with God. Guess who won? I did. \$4,000 scholarship. I leaped to my feet in joy at winning. Then it dawned on me, *oh no!* I had detasseled corn for four summers at \$3.35 an hour. All I had in my savings was around \$400. It took me some months to take the deep breath and help some kids in my church go to camp. Did I have to vow that? No. But once I did, I needed to fulfill it. I'm sure I have failed in this along the way too. How about you?

Here is a great summary of this section,

"This writer's target is the well-meaning person who likes a good sing and turns up cheerfully enough to church; but who listens with half an ear, and never quite gets around to what he has volunteered to do for God." (Derek Kidner. *The Message of Ecclesiastes: A Time to Mourn and a Time to Dance [The Bible Speaks Today]*, p. 52)

Why Loving Money Instead of God is Empty (Verses 10-12)

There are three reasons here why loving money is ultimately empty: No satisfaction, solitude, or sleep.

No satisfaction

"He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income; this also is vanity." (Ecclesiastes 5:10) Here is a man who would know. Solomon was one of the richest men who ever lived. He told us in chapter 2 that he intentionally pursued meaning from money and possessions but it left him empty. He called it vanity there and again here in chapter 5.

Here he explains the inner dynamic. If you love money, there is an intrinsic quality about loving money—the desire is insatiable. *"He will not be satisfied with money."* (Verse 10) A materialistic motivation for life is a guaranteed path to perpetual human discontentment. If Solomon's conclusion is unconvincing, listen to these (Randy Alcorn, *Money, Possessions and Eternity*, p. 47):

- John D. Rockefeller – *"I have made many millions, but they have brought me no happiness"*
- W.H. Vanderbilt – *"The care of \$200 million is enough to kill anyone. There is no pleasure in it."*
- John Jacob Astor – *"I am the most miserable man on earth"*
- Henry Ford – *"I was happier when doing a mechanic's job."*
- Andrew Carnegie – *"Millionaires seldom smile."*

These are iconic rich dudes in American history. None of them were happy in their wealth. When asked, *how much money is enough?* Rockefeller famously said, *"Just a little bit more."* (Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*, p. 132) Perhaps unknowingly each of these men is affirming the truth of Ecclesiastes and the whole Bible. God has placed eternity in our hearts. God had made us for himself forever. We are made for eternal joy and satisfaction in God. Sin has torn that divine satisfaction from us leaving us to try and find it somewhere in this world. Money represents the ability to buy this world. To have this world. But image-bearers can't be satisfied by this world. Millionaires seldom smile. Why? Money can never substitute for how God engineered us to be truly happy.

It's too obvious to ignore. Prince's death this week is another example. He was worth \$300 million. Days before he died he was treated for a drug overdose. There is strong speculation

that drugs may have caused his death. Incredible talent. Incredible wealth and fame. But something was missing for Prince. He had to numb the pain and \$300 million couldn't do it.

No solitude

"When goods increase, they increase who eat them, and what advantage has their owner but to see them with his eyes?" (Ecclesiastes 5:11) As net worth and possessions increase, so do all the people trying to get at your money. People come with their hands out. Family expects you to bail them out. Friends hang around hoping to get a piece of the pie. Uncle Sam takes his share.

This is the NBA player with his posse. Groupies. Hangers-on. How would you like it if every family member was constantly calling you asking for money? I'm not rich and they still do! Everyone taking. All this for what? Winning the lottery destroys so many people's lives.

Stuff. Things. A number next to a bank account number on a financial statement. All this drama and trouble for a number on a sheet of paper or toys in the garage that you can sit and look at. Is it worth no solitude?

No sleep

"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." (Verse 12) The laborer works hard with his hands and when he puts his head on the pillow, he doesn't worry about financial markets or making payroll or who might be stealing from him. He just sleeps.

The more you have the more there is to worry about. These keep him or her up in the night. Money means anxiety constantly nagging at the rich man's soul.

¹³ "There is a grievous evil that I have seen under the sun: riches were kept by their owner to his hurt, ¹⁴ and those riches were lost in a bad venture. And he is father of a son, but he has nothing in his hand. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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? ¹⁷ Moreover, all his days he eats in darkness in much vexation and sickness and anger." (Verses 13-17)

Famous words: *"Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return."* (Job 1:21) We came with nothing. We take nothing with us. Solomon's point is that when money is our big goal in life, all our toiling is for something that when we have it and live for it, it actually decreases our happiness.

"You simply cannot serve the King of kings and have acquisition of wealth as the organizing dream of your heart." (Paul David Tripp, *Sex and Money: Pleasures That Leave You Empty and Grace That Satisfies*, p. 164) Jesus said it, you cannot serve two masters. God or money? Which is it?

If we stopped here we could think God is anti-money or even anti-wealth, which isn't true. God doesn't condemn the rich for being rich. It is sin when the organizing dream of our hearts is our riches. There is another way forward which brings God back into the picture. What a difference!

Verse 15 is another repetition of the life's-too-short-to-drink-bad-coffee theme. Life is short. Accept it. Enjoy it including the good gifts God provides to you.

How to Love God Instead of Money (Verses 18-20)

18th Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and 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. 19th 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. 20th For he will not much remember the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart.” (Ecclesiastes 5:18-20)

Enjoy his gifts as his gifts

This is slippery because money and possessions are so easily deified in our hearts. All our possessions come with signs around their neck saying, *Love me! Live for me!* The key is to understand that money and the ability to make money are gifts from God. The ability to enjoy them is also a gift from God. We are not owners; we are stewards of what God has given to us.

I have known people with money and you can tell it's part of their identity. They talk a lot about their money. They talk about their success. They flash it around. I have also known well-to-do people who have remained as down to earth as an old shoe. Money hasn't changed them at all. What's the difference? Do they see what they have as a gift from God or something they have a right to? We don't have rights to gifts. A gift is a gift.

By the standards of earth and history, everyone in America is rich. You may not think so but when we get to heaven, we will be known as the richest Christians in history. So this is very relevant for all of us.

How can you know if you see God's gifts as actual gifts? How generous are you with them? How willingly do you share them with others? How do you respond when you take a loss? Is it devastating? Nobody likes losing money but does your life lose its purpose too? Are you jumping off a bridge? If these are gifts, I'm free to enjoy them, share them, give them, or even lose them.

Strive for contentment with what he has given

"...and to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil—this is the gift of God.” (Verse 19) Remember, God is sovereign. Accepting our lot doesn't mean we can't strive and save and work hard. But it does mean that we can rest in what we have as being from God too. Many societies see the rich as being blessed by God and everyone else is not blessed. In reality, God's real blessing has nothing to do with our financial status. God's real blessing has everything to do with our eternal status.

And on this level, the rich are at a disadvantage because riches make it harder for us to receive eternal riches by faith in Jesus. Jesus himself said, *"Only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 19:23)* All their stuff begs them to believe they don't need God or the gospel. They are self-sufficient and quite comfortable in this world. But the poor have no such hurdles. With no earthly treasure, they are free to seek all their real treasure as being eternal treasure given to them by faith in Jesus.

Seek joy from God internally not externally

"For he will not much remember the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart." (Ecclesiastes 5:20 ESV) This is the true gift, to find the source of our joy internally. Our culture preaches that joy comes in external circumstances. The new house or spouse or car or tech device or man-toy. The source of joy is external things and circumstances. But Jesus had few if any of these things yet was the most joyous human to ever live. Paul writes in Philippians, *"In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need."* (Philippians 4:12)

How can I do that? I source my joy spiritually and internally. I rejoice that my name is written in the Lamb's book of life. I rejoice that my sins are forgiven. I rejoice that my real treasure is in heaven where moth and rust cannot destroy and thieves can't break in and steal (Matthew 6:19). Are you discontented materially? The answer isn't a bonus or windfall or a rich uncle leaving you anything. Then you would just be a discontented rich person. The answer to the longing of our hearts is never material. It is always ultimately spiritual and discovering in Jesus a satisfaction and joy that the world didn't give and the world can't take away.

Scripture quotations are taken from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers.

Additional Scripture quotations are taken from *Holy Bible, New Living Translation*, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Additional Scripture quotations are taken from *Revised Standard Version of the Bible*, copyright © 1946, 1952, and 1971 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

© 2016 by Steve DeWitt. You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that: (1) you credit the author, (2) any modifications are clearly marked, (3) you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, (4) you include Bethel's website address (www.bethelweb.org) on the copied resource.