

Ecclesiastes 5:1-20

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 06 October 2024

Preacher: Reuben Hunter

[0 : 0 0] Ecclesiastes 5, do turn there, page 555. What we discover is this point our preacher has covered a huge amount of ground for us.

! He started with the unstoppable seasons, if you remember, and the cycles of life. He said, what has been will be, and what has been done is what will be done. He then looked into the life of wisdom as a pursuit. How do we live well? Pursue wisdom. And he followed that then with the pursuit of pleasure, a life that is given to pleasure. And then he followed that with a life devoted to hard work. And he has consistently told us that building our lives on these things, trying to gain profit, trying to gain in a life that is oriented towards these things is vanity. He says, all of them are vapor. He then made the point that God is the Lord of all history, and he has set the times for all of our lives. Even injustice is under God's good hand, and one day will be resolved according to his good and perfect plan. In the meantime, we should enjoy what he has given us, and we should share that joy with others. That's what the preacher has said. But are we listening? That is God's message to the world about how his world works, but do we believe it? It doesn't seem so. What are the bestsellers in every bookshop? Alongside the cookbooks and the sport biographies, there is always multiple titles in a genre that we could call How to Gain. Podcasts the same, different shows with thousands and thousands of downloads, whether it's life or work or pleasure or wisdom. How to Gain. And despite the fact that we've all tasted something of the vapor of life in this fallen world, we pursued something in some way that we thought would bring us contentment or joy or peace or fulfillment, and it didn't. But despite this bitter experience, the life advice bestsellers are bestsellers because we don't believe Solomon's wisdom about life under the sun. And this evening in chapter 5, we come to a hinge in the book where Solomon presses on us this point, and he tells us that we need to make a choice. The choice is there in verse 1. Can you see it? 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. Do you see the choice? The choice is,

Solomon says, we can listen to God or we can take an alternative path. The path is the way of the fool. We can listen and trust God's Word and what it says. We can, verse 7, if you look, we can fear Him, or we can pursue life on our terms, thinking that there actually is gain out there. There actually is profit to be made out there, and we are the one who will find it. One of these ways is wise, Solomon says, and the other is foolish. And Solomon describes here how the choice we make will be seen.

It'll be seen in two ways. It'll be seen in how we speak to and how we live before God. That's what he's describing in chapter 5. These two ways of living, how we speak to and how we live before God. We've taken, of course, all of us have taken one of those two paths, the path of listening and living it out, or the path of folly and living that out. And it's seen in the way we speak to and the way we live before God. Now, Solomon describes how this plays out, mainly from the perspective of the fool. So, we will take that angle. So, first of all, what he describes is the fool at worship, verses 1 to 7, the fool at worship. Guard your steps, verse 1, 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. 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. For a dream comes with much busyness, and a fool's voice with many words. Now, at first, this doesn't seem to fit with the idea that the fool has chosen his own path rather than listening to God. He's in the house of God, we're told, after all. He's at church. He is a religious man, but listen to his speech. His speech makes clear that his heart still thinks way too highly of himself. Out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks. So, here is a heart that has plenty to say to God about what he thinks and what he wants God to do for him. Rash words, hastily spoken. A sacrifice of fools here is the opposite of a

sacrifice of praise to God from lips that honor his name. And they do this without even realizing that it's a problem. Solomon says, this is folly. When we come to worship, we should, first of all, verse 1, lean in to listen. We are in the presence of the living God, the one who dwells in heaven in unapproachable light. So, it is much more important that he speaks to us than that we speak to him. [5 : 48] If we recognize that, then, verse 2, our words will be few. Literally, verse 2 says, do not let your heart rush to bring up a matter in God's presence. Our speech should be measured, and it should be brief. Now, this is an exhortation to organize your thoughts before you speak, and to keep those words succinct. Prayer should be understandable, and it should be clear, and it doesn't sanctify foolishness to simply add, in Jesus' name, at the end of our prayers. Nor does it help God to hear us if we use some version of his name like punctuation throughout.

Oh, God, please hear me, God, as I pray to you, God. Father God, please help come to my aid, Father God, right now, Father God, please, Father God. That's not a way of getting God's attention. But our prayer should also be brief, Solomon says. Let your words be few. Now, Solomon made this point, in a general sense, consistently through the Proverbs. You see, care about the use of the tongue consistently comes up as a theme in Proverbs. For example, Proverbs 21, 23, whoever keeps his mouth and his tongue keeps himself out of trouble. And James 1, 19, let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger. An economy of words is one of the marks of a wise person, because they only speak after sufficient thought. And the fool is often marked by the opposite.

Always lots to say. Now, I don't mean that it's necessarily sinful to be a talkative person, but that foolish people have plenty to say about people and about things that are nothing to do with them. It is interesting, isn't it, that when Jesus taught us to pray, he did so with a remarkably brief prayer. When we pray the Lord's Prayer each Lord's Day in the morning, normally here, just think about how brief that is. Six petitions, that's all. Now, of course, we do develop our prayers along the lines of the themes there, but it is remarkably brief. Let your words be few.

Solomon then raises another kind of foolish verbal sacrifice, we could call it, to be avoided as well. Verses 4 to 7. Look at verse 4. When you vow a vow to God, do not delay in 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. Let not your mouth lead you into sin, and do not say before the messenger that it was a mistake. What he's talking about here is a vow that is made to God, but that is not fulfilled. Now, the making of these kinds of vows in a spontaneous way is not really that common in our kinds of churches. I vow to you, O God, that I will do this thing. We don't often talk like that. But a vow is a solemn promise that we make to God. And we do do that in several very important ways. The first quite obvious way is becoming a church member. We saw it this evening with the children. They affirmed their faith in God.

[9 : 17] They testified that they've been baptized and trust in Christ alone for their salvation, and they vowed to support this church and submit to this church's leaders. Now, if you're an adult and you come into membership in this church, you say even more.

If you are a member of this church, this is what you've affirmed. Do you recognize the authority of the elders and assent to the governance and oversight of the International Presbyterian Church? And do you agree to accept their discipline, if that should ever be necessary? And you said, I do. That was a vow that you made. Do you promise to support the church by prayer, giving money and time, and caring practically for individuals? Do you commit yourself to building and maintaining healthy relationships within this church, treating your fellow believers as your brothers and sisters in Christ? If you're a member of this church, you vowed to do those things.

These are witty things to vow. We shouldn't rush into making them. And as far as it depends on us, we should come through on them. The second kind of vow we make to God is when someone becomes an officer of this church, an elder or a deacon. Among the vows that elders of this church take, we promise this, to be faithful and diligent in the exercise of all private and personal duties, which are necessary for us as a Christian and as an elder in Christ's church, to devote ourselves to prayer and the study of God's Word and to seek to live our life as an example of Christian discipleship to the flock. If you are a member of this church, you are under the care of elders who have made that vow. They've made it to you and they've made it to God.

Solomon says that if we're not going to deliver on those words, we'd be better off not making the vow in the first place. Church membership and officer of the church. The third category is obviously marriage. The old Anglican marriage ceremony begins by reminding everyone that we are, dearly

beloved, we are gathered here in the sight of God. God is present when marriage is conducted and a couple make their vows in his presence. Solomon is saying that the making of a vow should bind you to keep it. The making of the vow should bind you to keep it. The making of the vow is the reason that you don't go back on it. The thought of going back on the vow, you think to yourself, well, no, I can't do that. Why not? Because I made a vow. The vow itself is the reason that you don't break it. Our culture doesn't much care for the binding nature of vows anymore, does it? As you think about the direction of your life, does the vow that you made in becoming a church member influence the decision about where you go and what you do? It should, because it's a vow.

[12:21] Now, I'm not saying there aren't reasonable reasons to move church. There are. Relocation, change in theology. But I am saying that the consumer mindset that our culture pursues shouldn't make you go back on your word. Not when it comes to church membership, not when it comes to church leadership, and not when it comes to marriage. You can get divorced very easily today. When things get hard, you can go back on your word. You can. The law allows you to do it as easily as can be. Solomon says, however, that's what a fool does. And then look at verse 6.

When you say, but you made a vow, they say, verse 6, oh, I didn't mean it. I wasn't serious. Oh, my feelings changed. Let not your mouth lead you into sin, and do not say before the messenger that it was a mistake. Here's why. The temptation to say, oh, I was joking. I didn't mean it.

Oh, my feelings changed. Things are different now. Look at verse 6. God is not mocked. If we don't keep our word, it's not just, oh, well, that's a bit unfortunate. It actually invokes God's anger.

Why should God be angry at your voice and destroy the work of your hands? Wise men and women watch what they say in God's house.

Well, that's the fool at worship. The church service ends, and it probably doesn't surprise you that the one who is foolish at worship doesn't leave his folly there. Solomon shows how it comes with him into the world. So here's our second point, the fool in the world. That's what's going on in verses 8 to 20. The fool at worship, the fool in the world. The first problem is, verse 8, that he is naive. 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, higher, and there are yet higher ones over them. But this is gain for a land in every way, a king committed to cultivated fields.

[14:43] Solomon is pointing to the very fact, the existence of injustice and corruption in the world, and he's pointing to the person who sees this and says, wow, my, oh, my, oh, my, I had no idea.

I had no idea. I had no idea that powerful people exploited the poor, and then their mates all covered for each other. I had no idea. That's what's going on there. Do not be amazed at the matter. The high official is watched by a higher. The word watched there is better covered for or protected, and there are higher ones who do that. When you're in the system, they all look after each other, he's saying. Don't be surprised that it goes on.

It is a foolish way to think. If we think that we can game the world in some way, remember, that is what the person that Solomon has in view in the book of Ecclesiastes, somebody who thinks, I can game the world in the way it operates in order to gain for myself. I've tasted some of the vapor. I know that I've grasped for things, and there's just not been anything there. I know that, but I'm going to keep trying. I'll keep trying something, because there is gain to be had.

And so he's saying, look, if you're the sort of person that thinks that there can be some gain, if you are able to game the world in some way in order to bring in utopia, it's naive.

It's naive to think that those who have the power in a country won't use that for their own ends.

Surely, if any of us are thinking that that is possible, the whole COVID-19 nonsense was exhibit A of how this is true. The COVID lockdowns, the parties in Whitehall, the companies that got contracts to produce things that they had no expertise in producing, and all the hand-wringing since then, that should come as absolutely no surprise to us. People walking around going, my, oh, my, I had no idea that this kind of thing happened. Don't be amazed.

[16:41] The only one in the world who is immune from these corruptions is God himself. Don't be naive. It's foolish to be naive. The second problem with the fool in the world is that he has covetous. Verse 10. Look at verse 10.

It is the height of folly, Solomon is saying, to set your heart on money, because the pursuit of wealth never, ever, ever satisfies. Solomon could not be clearer. An increase in goods, verse 11, brings with it an increase in accountants and lawyers and staff and managers and all the kinds of people who send their bill at the end of the month. Look at verse 11.

When goods increase, they increase who eat them. And what advantage has their owner but to see them with his eyes? The man who lives hand to mouth, verse 12, he sleeps well at night. Why is that? Well, because he doesn't have any money to worry about. His boss, on the other hand, he lies awake because he knows that he has to keep making the money. He has to keep doing that in order to pay the school fees and pay his staff and keep up appearances with the other wealthy folk that he mixes with.

Plus, he knows that just one misstep, verse 14, verse 14, one misstep in an email or one oversight on a spreadsheet and he could lose it all. And those riches were lost in a bad venture.

One theologian says this, quote, men who build empires frequently find themselves holding a grizzly bear by the ears. The more they do, the less they're able to do. The more control they amass, the less control they have. The more power they acquire, the more powerless they feel. This is because the vanity of increase, the futility of silver and gold has a life of its own. A man may work hard to acquire money only to discover at the end of the day that the money actually acquired him. End quote.

[19 : 06] And Solomon says, if the fact that the love of money turns you into a slave, if the fact that isn't bad enough, Solomon has already made that clear in chapter 2, the old cliché is a cliché because it's true. When it comes to money, you can't take it with you, verse 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. The covetous man comes into the world naked, he leaves the world the same way, and the bit in the middle where he had all his stuff, he was a stressed out slave. Verse 17, the Couch described vexation, sickness, and anger.

Look around in our culture today. What do you see? An absolute shed load of vexation, sickness, and anger. People that have set their heart on gain through money, and that's where it leads.

Why, oh why, oh why do we not believe this? We still think that we're the one person who could handle wealth properly. We look around, we see the fact that all these people, vexed, sick, and angry, because they've set their hearts on money. It hasn't delivered the contentment, the joy, the peace that they'd hoped. It hasn't delivered the status that they thought would bring them the happiness and joy that they desperately wanted. And we think, if I had it, I'd be able to do it.

We covet what other people have, and we think that if we had that, it wouldn't change us. We'd still be the same person. In fact, maybe even if I had that, I could give more to the Lord.

[20 : 49] Actually, it's not that I want that much. I just want enough to be able to, whatever your thing is. That's how we think. But that's not how it works. Money always adds complexity and stress to your life. Always.

The Lord Jesus makes this point over and over. Two brothers fighting over their inheritance. What does he say? Watch out. Be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. Matthew 6, don't lay up for yourselves treasure on earth. Why should you not lay up treasure on earth? Moth and rust destroy, and thieves break in and steal. We don't believe this.

We don't believe this because the air that we breathe tells us that the opposite is true. Life is found in the abundance of possessions. It is. Store up for yourself treasure on earth because the man with the most toys wins. You say you're not satisfied odds because you don't have enough yet. Keep going.

You have no peace or joy. Well, you just haven't worked out yet how to play the game. Jesus says that you can gain the whole world and still forfeit your soul. And the reason that that happens is because we don't listen to Solomon's message here. We are fools when it comes to money because we pursue it at the expense of life in Christ. What does Jesus say? You cannot serve God and money. You can't. That was exactly the very thing that Jesus called the rich man who wasn't prepared to give up his wealth in order to follow him. He said, you're a fool. You have made a bad trade.

You're a fool. It is the worst trade you can make. Do not gain the whole world from the praise of others to more money than you'd ever be able to spend. Don't pursue that at the expense of your soul. To do so is folly. That's what Jesus says. And Solomon tells us actually there is a much better way.

[23 : 04] Now, it's becoming, if you've been with us in this series, it's becoming Solomon's theme tune. Look at verse 18. They hold 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. 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. For he will not much remember the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart.

Joy. Joy. Joy is mentioned four times there. It is possible to live in this world, the vapor world, the world where we're told a million times that the one thing you need is more money.

It is possible to live wisely in this world and to enjoy it. How do we do it? Verse 19. Verse 19. Drill this into your heart, the gift of God.

That is what Solomon has seen in this world under the sun. If we listen to him, we can learn the secret of joy. What is it? It is to receive our lot in life as gift from his hand and to do so with a thankful heart. And when we receive everything as a gift, what do you do with a gift? You say thank you.

When we receive it as gift and we say thank you, God then also gives us the ability to enjoy what we have. If we think that what we have is ours by right, if we have a mentality of entitlement, and if we take what we have for granted, we say, well, I should have these things. I have a right to these things. Then we can have these things times a hundred, times a thousand, and they'll just make us miserable and anxious. But if we know that everything is gift, all of it, and our hearts are full of praise for what we have and not envy for what we do, then we won't worry much about finding answers to our troubles. Verse 20. We'll not much remember the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart. If it's all gift, if our hearts are full of praise, if our hearts are absent of envy, then we can look at the vapor. We can recognize that it's meaningless. We can get on with life and not worry about it because we'll be so taken up with joy. The Apostle Paul was obviously listening intently to Solomon because he could write to Timothy saying, godliness with contentment is great gain. The question for us is, will we listen to him as well? Let's pray together.

[26 : 28] Amen.