

7. Vanity in Wealth

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[0 : 00] to this passage in Ecclesiastes chapter 5 and 6. We come back this morning to our studies in Ecclesiastes after a few weeks break over Easter.

And I must say that as I've been coming back to this myself, I do find it supremely refreshing to come back to the words of Kohelet, the preacher. He's such a great realist. And he's forever pricking the bubble of our fantasy and delusion that so commonly pervades our human thinking, our human societies. Again and again, this little phrase, Hevel, vanity, emptiness, ephemeral.

He uses it just like a broom to sweep aside so much of our illusory thinking. That's the image, remember, that Eugene Peterson used, a little broom to sweep away the vanity of all our thinking. And that really is a vivid image, and it is what the preacher is doing all the way through this book. And how badly we need his wit and his wisdom. Because not just as individuals, but as societies, we live in a web of spin and half-truth and deception about so many aspects of life.

[1 : 18] Of course, we complain about it, but the fact is that we're all complicit in it. Collusion in delusion is really the hallmark of humanity.

And that's the Bible's clear teaching at any rate. It's a fundamental mark of what sin really is. The Apostle Paul says that plainly in Romans chapter 1. Do you remember?

The truth about God is plain, says Paul, because God has made it plain. But by their unrighteousness, he says, they have suppressed the truth.

And so human beings, he says, have become futile in their thinking. They've become foolish and darkened in their hearts. And that, of course, is what explains our world.

That's why the world is the way it is. Collusion in delusion and self-deception. Claiming to be wise, says Paul, but we become fools.

[2 : 18] And it's the sheer folly of this rebellion that the preacher wants to expose all the way through this book of Ecclesiastes. And he does it by sweeping away the illusions that we cling to, the deceptions that we hide in, and he exposes the real truth about life in this world.

And remember, don't forget this, his primary audience isn't the secular world. Of course, the secular thinker is exposed by what the preacher says.

But first of all, he has the professing believer in his sights. We mustn't forget that. And ought to be obvious, of course, because God's word is primarily his word written for his people, for his church. But of course, it's amazing, isn't it, how often as Christians, we don't want to face the challenges and the probings of our hearts that God gives us in the piercing words of Scripture.

We love to have evangelistic messages, whatever that might be, but something aimed at the outsider. It's much less common for us to be keen about God turning his sights on us.

[3 : 24] But that's what he's doing in the Bible, always. Every part of the Bible really is addressed to people who profess to believe, who profess to follow God.

Otherwise, they wouldn't be reading it. And it's certainly so here. Do you remember in the first part of chapter 5, a few weeks ago, we saw that he is speaking directly to those who do go to the house of God.

And so his challenge is, is our corporate worship marked by the reality of faith, or is it just, in fact, the ritual of fantasy? So easy, isn't it, you see, to pretend our way through life in spiritual terms.

And that's why the Bible so often challenges us about the reality of our spiritual experience. What actually comes out of our mouth in terms of praise, in terms of prayer, in terms of the promises that we make to God.

That's what that first half of chapter 5 is all about. Is it real and true, or is it a sham? But of course, real worship is far, far more than just that, just what we do in our corporate times together.

[4 : 30] It's never less than that, but it's much more. It involves every aspect, doesn't it, of our life lived before God. And so, as one writer has put it, the good life, the life of real worship, involves not only what comes out of our mouth, but what goes into our mouths, and how things go into our mouths.

In other words, how we consume. That's the key word, really, and the key concept in the rest of chapter 5 and chapter 6 that we've read. Chapter 6, verse 9, I think, ends the first half of this book. It's the last time we have that little phrase, vanity, a striving after the wind. And this last section is all about living as consumers in this world.

And it's about the real difference and stark difference that there is between true faith and false. True faith that is living for God and for eternity, with an anchor fixed not under the sun, but above the sun, not in this world.

And false faith that doesn't. The true faith has a contented attitude to all things that are material, to all our needs and to our wants.

[5 : 45] But by contrast, the faith that really is fantasy and self-deception, that's living really rooted in this world, seeking gain that's, well, just ephemeral and fleeting, that way is always burdened by a craving appetite of consumption.

And yet, paradoxically, it has no power to enjoy it. No real satisfaction at all is found if that's the way you're living your life. You see, we're all consumers.

We all live in a material world, a world of things, of wealth, of possessions, a world of consumables. But where is real consumer satisfaction to be found?

That's the question. And that's the preacher's subject in these verses. So let's look at them and see what his argument is. First of all, look at verses 8 and 9. And here he introduces his theme, and he addresses the prevalence of consumerism, or of materialism, in society.

He's taking up again the theme of the early part of chapter 4, that of the oppression, the oppressiveness of the materialist consumer ethic. Now, he noted there that all of that arises from envy.

[7 : 05] Do you remember? All toil and success is driven, he says, by a man's envy of his neighbor. Chapter 4, I think, verse 3. But here, you see, in chapter 5, verse 8 and 9, he's boldly stating for us just how endemic and just how systemic that whole mindset is in society as a whole.

The opposition to the poor and the oppression of the poor and the violation of justice and righteousness. It's institutionalized. That's what he's saying in these verses.

That's the point of verse 8. It's in the very fabric of the way that the world works. And we are not to be surprised by this. Don't be amazed, he says.

Be realist. Don't be naive. See the world as it really is. This is a world of structural, systemic oppression.

There are layers of bureaucracy. We all know that, don't we? Whether it's the public sector or the private sector. There are hierarchies of power and of influence. And everyone is looking out for their own gain in that whole system.

[8 : 14] And in the end, says the preacher, the income flow is only one way, upward, right to the top dog, right to the king himself. Now verse 9 here is quite hard to translate.

In the Hebrew, it's really rather ambiguous. We can take it positively. Look how the ESV has it. This is gain for a land in every way. A king committed to cultivated fields.

In other words, it's saying it's a blessing actually to have a king somewhat above all this self-seeking to restrain the unfettered exploitation and injustice that there otherwise would be.

And I suppose sometimes it's true that even a tyrant is better than total anarchy. I guess some of the people in Iraq probably look at that today and think back to the days of Saddam Hussein.

I wonder whether it wasn't even better with a leader. We could take that verse positively as there. I think probably it's better to take it negatively. The New Living Translation translates it like this.

[9 : 21] Even the king milks the land for his own profit. In other words, at the end of the day it all amounts to this. The whole economy ultimately serves the pocket of the top dogs.

And I think that's what he's saying. It rather fits with what Samuel warns the people of Israel of in 1 Samuel 8 verse 10. Do you remember they were longing to have a king just like all the rest of the nations.

And he says to them he'll take your sons for soldiers. He'll take others to work his fields to reap his harvest. He'll take your daughters as cooks and perfumers and bakers.

He'll take the best of your fields, your vineyards, your orchards and so on. It all goes to the top. Well, I thank God I have to say for our queen who was 81 yesterday. Long may she reign I can say that very heartily. I think she does stand doesn't she in dignity above our real rulers the parliamentarians here and in Europe. But their gravy trains are pretty laden aren't they?

[10 : 25] With the bounty of the European taxpayer. Gold plated pensions and all that when everybody else has gone down the tubes. ever more generous expenses. Fact-finding missions all around the world usually to very exotic and nice and hot places.

Democracy is very good when you're in power and you've got the power to vote for your own pensions and your own business trips and all these sorts of things. But don't be amazed says the preacher. That's the world.

The prevalence of consumerism is almost absolute in our world and the flow steadily is in one direction. Upwards. It's always that way isn't it?

To the fat cats to the oligarchs whether you're Russian billionaires living in this country or not to the winners to the power brokers at every level whether it's in the town hall or it's parliament itself whether it's small business or whether it's mega caps.

That's the way the money goes. Right to the top of the world bank even as we've been seeing just in this last week. But that's just realism says the preacher.

[11 : 36] It's the mammon worship of the world of a consumer society. That's the way it is. But notice the second half of verse 8 because there's also clear recognition isn't there of why this is as it is.

For he says everyone is watching out for themselves. Society in other words is as it is because of the people who make up society.

And that's of course where the preacher's challenge is to us. I was reading this I couldn't help thinking of one of those statements by Lady Thatcher Margaret Thatcher when she was Prime Minister that was most vilified.

Do you remember? There's no such thing as society. I couldn't get that out of my mind. I went back and looked up the text of her speech and just listened to what she really said. Too many people have been given to understand that if they have a problem it's the government's job to cope with it. They're casting their problem on society. And you know there's no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families.

[12 : 44] And no government can do anything except through people. And people must look to themselves first. It's our duty to look after ourselves and then also to look after our neighbour.

Now I don't know what you think about Margaret Thatcher. I don't think it really matters and no doubt many of us will have very different views. But whatever you think of her I think I have to say that on that point at least she's very much in line with what the preacher in Ecclesiastes is saying right here.

What he's saying is we can't just look at the world and blame things on something nebulous called society. We can't just blame the nebulous forces of endemic consumerism.

We've all got personal individual responsibilities for playing our part in that. We are the people who make up society. And it's our appetites and it's our attitudes that shape the world that we live in. And the reality simply is as the preacher says here all of us by nature are watching out for ourselves and our gain and our place in the ladder of upward mobility instead of watching out for our neighbour and his needs and his concerns and seeing that as our responsibility.

[14 : 06] It's interesting that that word there in verse 8 watched everyone watching out is the very same word that's used in Genesis 4 verse 9 where God speaks to Cain and Cain says to God am I my brother's watcher my brother's keeper and the answer of course is yes you are that's the way God made you to be God made us to be people who love our neighbour as ourself but of course we by our sinful natures have reversed that haven't we we've become people who watch out for ourselves at the expense of our neighbour and that's why the world is as it is that's why society is as it is we are the problem and we're not to be surprised that's the way the world is always going to be until that is all the people of the world are transformed to be the people that we were made to be the Bible is absolutely clear and realistic about that that's not something that will ever be under the sun by any political agenda by any social agenda by any ideological dream no the ruinous nature of sin in our hearts is so prevalent that that can only be achieved says the Bible by the recreation of the whole universe through the redemption that's in

Jesus Christ and that is the Christian hope that's what we wait for that's what we long for when Jesus returns but for now we must be realistic about the world don't be amazed at the way society is it can't be any other way because of the people that make it up but as believing people of course we have to live in this world don't we while we wait for the new creation and it's so easy for us too to be drawn into this short-sighted this-worthless materialism isn't it even for believers that's what the preacher's concerned with well I certainly find that I'm sure you do it's so powerful isn't it because of the prevalence of consumerism in our society we colluded it together so the preacher turns us to a searching critique of materialism and he wants to warn us away from that path of folly and here in verses 10 to 17 he wants us to see the pain that consumerism inflicts on us it's just more plain realism isn't it what he's telling us is that wealth can actually be and often is a terrible curse in these verses he's telling us what consumerism can do to you if you seek from material things and from the material world what these things were never ever designed to give and therefore will never give and notice in these verses it's not how much you have it's a question of how much you desire and love and worship material consumption however much or little you have see verse 10 states the principle doesn't it materialism will not it cannot ever satisfy he who loves money will not be satisfied with money nor he who loves wealth with his income material things can't ever satisfy us ultimately because they are not ultimate and our appetites are ultimate therefore the eternal remember chapter 3 verse 11

God has put eternity into man's heart and that will never ever be satisfied merely by temporal things it's impossible and furthermore as we have more material things they just awaken in us a desire for more and for more just because we can't actually get satisfaction in them but look at how he puts his finger on the truth because of this misplaced attitude for satisfaction for looking for it in the wrong place wealth and consumption will hurt you whether you have it or whether you don't if that's your attitude look at verses 11 to 13 he tells us that riches kept just hurt you verse 13 riches were kept to their owners hurt and that just sums up verses 11 to 13 what he's telling us is that mammon worship material worship becomes a self-perpetuating religion and yet it's a dreadfully dissatisfying one look at verse 11 goods increase and what happens well so do the consumers and just think of a crass example of that in one of these lottery winners immediately what happens they're surrounded by scroungers by hangers on oh yes money talks but as one wit has said it only ever says one thing to me and that's goodbye that's true isn't it that's verse 11 the more wealth the more consumption and all the poor chap can do with look at his eyes as he as he becomes a hosing pipe with all his money disappearing to the consumers that's just what happens isn't it businessman gets up the ladder he gets bigger bonuses and what happens well his wife's clothes budget just gets inflated doesn't it he starts to have servants and cars and property soon his affairs become so complex he has to pay very expensive lawyers and accountants and people like that he can't sleep with the worry of it all so he ends up shelling out even more money to get private therapy to try and help him to get sleep verse 12 look the satisfaction of the rich will not let him sleep literally the full stomach as our

ESV translates it well isn't that our consumer society don't we recognize ourselves in here even if it's not the extreme that's portrayed here most of the illnesses in our society today are caused by overconsumption we can't deny that can we here's what Derek Kidner says we offer an unconscious comment on it by our modern exercise machines and health clubs for it's one of our human absurdities to pour out money and effort just to undo the damage of money and ease well he wrote that 30 years ago what would he say today oh yes riches are kept by their owner to their hurt and what a contrast to verse 12 do you see the sweet sleep of a laborer whether he has little in his stomach or much puts his feet up he thanks God for a good day's work and whether he's hungry or full he sleeps the sleep of the faithful but the consumer attitude can never have that sweet sleep and it's not just having riches that hurt you if that's your mentality the thought of losing them haunts you as well that's the first of verses 14 to 17 isn't it once you've had material things it's so hard to lose them and the very thought of it haunts you in life and it happens look verse 14 those riches are lost in a bad venture or really it just means the unhappy business those riches are lost what he means is that the general complexities and facts of life will ultimately rob us of any material things that we think we have gained life ultimately will consume all our wealth whether it's great or small in chapter 4 do you remember he spoke about the lonely miser but here it's not it's a happy family man verse 14 says he's got children but regardless of that verse 15 do you see in the end he'll go naked to the grave just as he came just as he came so shall he go and what gain is there the wind just blows it all away life itself will in the end consume everything that we have either through taxes or

through the other great inevitability death it's one of the curses of prosperity isn't it in our western world we live longer we live long enough to have more and more infirmity and then that consumes all of our wealth the NHS budget just goes up and up and up and up doesn't it and it will do forever either individually our wealth will be drained away as we pay our own bills for looking after us or else an aging prosperous society will gradually impoverish itself as collectively we pay more and more and more to look after us as we get old that's just reality isn't it and when you face that honestly it haunts your life it's bound to that's what verse 17 is saying it puts a dark cloud over the whole of your life all his days he eats he consumes in darkness you see the reality when we face it is very painful that's why we collude in fantasy and delusion to hide from it to hide from the truth we fill our lives with the now we banish thoughts of the future we banish talk of death we sanitize it all out of the way because if we allowed realism into our thinking well we'd live our life under a dark cloud be full of vexation he says sickness anger haunted by the thought of the inevitable loss that will come no matter how much we think we have well there are people like that aren't there we are faced up to the reality and live a life of vexation and pain that's the pain that consumerism inflicts on us well must we therefore hide from it is that the only way well no is the preacher it's not the material things themselves that give us the pain or indeed the pleasure either it's all a matter of our attitude it's all a matter of our appetite and that's what really matters and that's the answer to finding real consumer satisfaction it lies in seeing that and so he goes on to put before us starkly two totally contrasting attitudes first of all in verses 18 to 20 it's supremely positive isn't it it's the real pleasure of godly consumption you see what he says is what we really need is not the material things themselves but the power to enjoy them to eat them to consume them it's all the same word with joy and he says that's something that comes only from god it's a gift of god he says you see the bible's answer to materialism is not asceticism it's not to become a hermit denying yourself anything it's not to become like these indian holy men who roll around in the dust naked and beat themselves it's not to become someone who wants to deny every pleasure no the bible's answer isn't that the bible's answer to materialism isn't asceticism it's godliness in fact it's god himself the power says the preacher to consume with joy comes from god alone it's his gift so verse 19 says very plainly but you'll find this gift only if you're in love with god not if you're in love with mammon with the material world and that's the paradox of satisfaction in this world that's what is good and fitting that's literally what says they're good and beautiful verse 18 to do to consume with joy whether you've got little or much whether verse 18 it's just the simple things in life food and drink and honest toil or verse 19 the great things wealth and possession what you need in either case is not just the things but the power to enjoy them and that's the greatest gift of all that's what brings real joy whether you've got much or whether you've got nothing but alas it's so rare isn't it and that's not because god is mean or niggardly in giving this gift simply because you can't receive this gift if your hands are full of grasping consumer material things grasping the things of this world the paradox that lies at the very heart of life you cannot love this world and be satisfied with this world only if you truly love god and you're detached utterly from the things of this world can you ever find real joy and rejoicing in this world's things and in this world's relationships and the way of detachment is not in revering these material things looking to them for what they can never give seeking significance in them but nor is it in rejecting all of these things as though they were wrong in themselves we must be clear about that some

[27 : 54] Christians are very perverse about these sort of things they think that well if they really enjoy something then it must be wrong god must be against it no sometimes speak to young folk who are all in a muddle about guidance they think that if something is their heart's desire for some vocation to do something then somehow it must be against god's will no that's perverse we're not to revere this world's pleasures as our god but nor are we to reject them as anti-god no what is the preacher says we're to receive them with thanksgiving and with rejoicing verse 19b accept our lot accept our literally our reward and rejoice in our toil and work for this is the gift of god and that's the key that's the secret to living life at its very fullest verse 20 not preoccupied with life's cares why because god keeps us preoccupied with joy in our hearts for him that's just exactly the message of the new testament gospel isn't it remember paul's words to timothy in first timothy four to six yes he warns timothy exactly almost in the same words the preacher uses here he says yes you'll leave the world naked just as you came in he warns him that craving for wealth is a terrible thing it can lead many to wander away from the truth but he doesn't tell timothy to be an ascetic he tells him to be detached he tells him to receive all god's good gifts with thanksgiving for god has given us he says every good gift to enjoy but you will only find that joy if your hopes are not set on the uncertainty of

riches but on the certainty of god himself love it's when our hearts are most fixed on the eternal treasures that we're most liberated to enjoy and rejoice in the good gifts that god gives us in this world we know that because then we've been learning how to be satisfied with joy and thanksgiving even in incomplete satisfaction satisfaction and this world's things can only ever give us incomplete satisfaction not more if only we could get our heads around that if only we could really take a hold of it and believe it it would transform our lives wouldn't it we'd be able to rejoice in the very incompletely satisfying things of this world like our jobs like our bank balances like our marriages like our family situations like our church life like everything that we always wish could be a bit more and a bit better than it is but you see we don't we always just want something more and better but the reality is it's not more and better and greater things and jobs and relationships and so on that we need it's greater power to enjoy whatever it is that we have that we need and if we don't have that there'll never be as verses 18 to 20 portray we'll only ever be what chapter 6 verses 1 to 7 lay before us as a total contrast isn't it not the pleasure of godly consumption but the sheer poverty of godless consumption a real evil says verse 1 that the preacher finds heavy or common among mankind people who seem to have everything and yet it's not a blessing it's a curse it's a grievous evil if you don't have power to enjoy to consume verse 2 wealth possessions honor status in the world but without the gift that only god can give to truly enjoy

these things it'll only ever be in vain a grievous evil and you see that gift is all dependent on our desire either we really truly have a desire for god himself and therefore we'll be satisfied with whatever it is god gives us or our real desire is not for god himself but just for what god can give us his gifts and friends if that is our hearts we will never ever be satisfied no matter what god gives us but isn't that how we are so often i have to ask myself how often do i pray to god for things and how often do i just ask god for contentment whatever the things are that i have or haven't i think that's why so often we feel don't we that god's let us down or he's disappointed us or he's failed us but no it's we who are wrong the truth is we're not worshipping the true god at all we're worshipping an idol a false idol of godless consumerism we just want what god can give us that's always been true for god's people all through their history setting up idols in the temple of god deceiving themselves colluding with one another pretending to worship the true god but really just disguising a consumer mentality but see the poverty of it in these verses you can have in answer to your prayers even all the blessings of life look at verse three length of days and family galore the true blessings of the old testament but if you can't truly be satisfied he says if you haven't got the real key to life in rejoicing in the eternal god and living in his presence for eternal reward then you've got nothing verse four a stillborn child is better off than you verse six even if you live twice a thousand years if your eyes have never been opened to see the good the great eternal reality the thing that gives meaning to everything well then you've got nothing in the end everyone just goes to the same place to the grave and friends the sad reality is this if you haven't found contentment in life you won't find contentment in death a discontented life ends in a discontented death verse seven all the toil of man is for his mouth it's for consumption and yet his appetite is not satisfied that's the poverty of godless consumption and alas you know there's many a professing

Christian who in the end discovers that he's been living his life seeking just earthly satisfaction and has never really found it and dies a bitter and disappointed person but friends the preacher's whole message to us is that it needn't be like that see he leaves us in these last two verses eight and nine with a question and with an answer we don't have to be like the fool living his life like that we can be like the wise man verse eight who is the wise man what's he like the one who even though he might be poor knows how to conduct himself in this mortal world in this passing world the land of the living how are you wise well verse nine is the answer isn't it it's plain there's a vast gulf between these two different ways to live the way of wisdom and the way of folly the way of true faith and the way of self-deceived materialism look at verse nine better says the preacher is the sight of the eyes that is as chapter six verse six says enjoying the good seeing the good seeing the good that you have and having the power to enjoy it to consume it whether you have little or much to enjoy it with joy the power of the contented attitude that he's talking about content with whatever God gives us here because we live not just with a horizontal horizon but with a vertical one because we see and we long for what is above the sun and therefore we're liberated to live in this world and be satisfied with whatever it is we have or whatever it is we don't have however incomplete it is we see the good we have a contented attitude the other way he says is the wandering of the appetite it's always seeking for what you haven't got and never seeing the good in what you have not a contented attitude but

it's a consumer appetite seeking and chasing and worshipping things that satisfy now the world's things the world's terms but alas the reality is that he who seeks satisfaction in these things will never ever be satisfied it's a chasing after the wind it's vanity so there's two ways to live says the preacher the sheer folly of sin or the real wisdom of faith but hang on is it a real choice it says here doesn't it that the power of contentment of satisfaction the power of joy is a gift from God how can we choose something that's only God's gift that's not in our power to have by ourselves well that's true the key to life the key to eternity is God's gift but the whole wonder of the Christian gospel is that our God is a giving God who longs to give his gifts to those who ask him and he gives when we ask him to give listen as I finish to the preacher the one to whom this preacher always points to Jesus Christ the God himself speaking in the flesh to everyone who will listen as that includes all of us listen to what he says ask and it will be given to you seek and you will find knock and it will be opened to you for everyone who asks receives and the one who seeks finds and to the one who knocks it will be opened that's a promise to you it's a promise to you whether you're a long time believer and follower of

Jesus it's a promise to you whether you're encountering him for the very first time seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness says Jesus and all these things will be added to you that's the way of consumer satisfaction don't be like the foolish man always with an appetite for what you don't have be like the wise man and ask Jesus to fill your heart with the joy of his kingdom and the joy of his presence that's the way to true consumer satisfaction in this life but also far far more importantly and abundantly for all eternity ask Jesus for his gift of joy let's pray I've seen what is good and fitting 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

[40 : 18] God has given him for this is his reward 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 he will not remember much the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart heavenly father turn our eyes away we pray from the things which will never satisfy and to your son our Lord Jesus Christ that we might receive at his hand the gift of glad rejoicing in receiving his kingdom and therefore living our lives in this world with all its problems with all its lacks with the contented joy in our hearts that comes from you alone teach us we pray the way of satisfaction in the way of praising and loving you for

Jesus sake Amen well the psalmist knew all about this and we're going to end by taking x geometry and light heart completely above in r ah oh tamb solidous hay goodce■iz May did ■■■■■