

“MAN’S NEED EXPOSED”

After his brief consideration of the importance of sincerity in worship in the previous passage, the Preacher now turns his focus to the topic of wealth and abundance. The seven paragraphs in this passage contain a variety of observations that relate in one way or another to the subject of wealth. While the Preacher has a number of things to say here, the main idea is this: *a life lived for the sake of material gain is an empty and tragic life, but a life that rests content with one’s lot, whatever your lot may be, is a better life by far.* As we study this text today, we will consider how each paragraph contributes to this overarching message, and then we will seek to understand how this teaching applies to our lives today.

The passage begins with a short paragraph on politics. The Preacher has already spoken of the inevitability of oppression in this present age, and here he talks about oppression on a wide scale, the oppression and injustice that can take place in an entire province. The point being made in verse 8 is that civil governments are often unfair. God instituted civil government in order to hold evil in check, and in many ways it serves that purpose. However, because of the fact that all ruling officials, along with all of those who support and elect them, are fallen beings, governments sometimes commit injustice instead of upholding justice. And take note of what the Preacher has to say about this. He tells us not be amazed at it. The Preacher does not have utopian dreams about society, nor should we. This is just the way things are going to be. By all means, do what is in your power to promote justice in society. But do not operate under the delusion that you,

or anyone else, is going to be able to fix everything that is wrong with the government.

Here is another example of how Ecclesiastes deals with the world as it really is. The Preacher is not going to tell us that there is a form of government in which the problem of injustice will be done away with once and for all. He knows better. He knows that the bureaucratic nature of civil government often creates unjust circumstances for people. Each official has someone else above him. He can always point the finger at someone else, or at the system in general, if people complain that something is unfair.

Despite the fact that verse 8 paints a fairly bleak picture of civil government, the Preacher does not come to the conclusion that anarchy is the solution. Instead, in verse 9 he reminds us that government is necessary and even beneficial. And this is even true when governments are unfair and unjust. As commentator Derek Kidner observes, “even tyranny is better than anarchy.” [*The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 55] Governments can be unfair, even oppressive, but they are necessary in order to protect rights, to provide regulations, to keep things in good repair, and to protect citizens against attack. In the words of the Preacher, it is good for a nation to be ruled by a king who wants to see his land prosper.

The next two paragraphs, verses 10-17, begin to deal more directly with the problems that surround the pursuit of wealth. The Preacher begins by telling us that people who live for money will never be satisfied. And he points out several of the drawbacks to making money your life’s pursuit. The desire for money is addictive and unsatisfying. Like other addictions, there will never be a point when you will have enough. Also,

money attracts leeches, people who want to sponge off of you. Money creates worry, as the Preacher demonstrates by contrasting the sleep of the laborer with the restlessness of the rich man. The love of money leads to hoarding, or what the Preacher calls keeping riches to your own hurt. Money can easily be lost. It only takes one bad investment to lose everything. And finally, money is certain to disappear when you die. As the saying goes, you can't take it with you.

After describing some of the problems that confront people when they live for the accumulation wealth and possessions, the Preacher stops to show us a better way to live, a way to avoid all of the worry and frustration that accompany the love of money. And what he says here is nothing new. We have heard him say it before. What is this better way? It is to be content with whatever the Lord is pleased to give you in this life. And I want to call your attention to how the Preacher words this. He refers to God as the giver of all of the things mentioned in verses 18-20. God gives each person his or her allotment of days on this earth. God gives wealth and possessions and honor and the power to enjoy them. God gives work. God gives joy. Everything in this life is a gift from God. This is a truth to which we must submit, even though it is often difficult for us to understand. Accepting this truth is the secret to finding contentment in this life. The only way to live a contented life is to be ready to take whatever comes to you, whether good or bad, as something from God's hand. The emphasis in this text is chiefly upon the good, but the Preacher will address the bad in the next chapter. To find true contentment we need to adopt the mindset of Samuel Rutherford when he wrote these words:

“The great Master Gardener, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, in a wonderful providence, with his own hand, planted me here, where by his grace, in this part of his vineyard, I grow; and here I will abide till the great Master of the vineyard think fit to transplant me.” [*The Loveliness of Christ*, 1]

Rutherford was “planted” in trying circumstances when he penned those words. He had been removed from his pulpit and was forbidden to preach anywhere else because of his refusal to conform to the extra-biblical practices that were being imposed upon the churches of Scotland in his day. Nevertheless, he believed that the Lord had planted him in this particular situation. He trusted that, in God’s holy wisdom, his situation was the soil in which he needed to be planted in order to grow in grace. Wherever you are in life, whatever you are experiencing, it is the Lord’s doing. It is a gift of his wonderful providence.

In the next paragraph, 6:1-6, the Preacher returns to his reflections upon the problems faced by those who make wealth their life’s goal. He talks about the person who does not lack anything that he desires, the man who reaches all of his goals in life, but is not given the power to enjoy them. Notice the continued emphasis upon the providence of God in these verses. This man’s wealth and possessions and honor have been given to him by God. But there is one thing that God has withheld from him: the ability to enjoy these gifts. This shows us that contentment itself is a gift from God. And what a tragedy it is

to lack this gift. You might have everything in the world, but if you lack the gift of contentment, you will be utterly miserable. You will never be satisfied. You will find no peace, no rest. This is why the Preacher goes so far as to say that a stillborn child is better off than the man who does not have the power to rest content in what God has given him. This might sound gloomy, but it is true. The man who lacks contentment will never find rest.

The Preacher continues to explore this theme in verses 7-9, where he talks about the restlessness of our desire. We toil and toil in order to satisfy our desires, yet our appetite cannot be satisfied. The more we get, the more we want. So what is the solution? It is just as the Preacher has been telling us: learn to be content right where you are. “Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the appetite.” Be satisfied with what has been set before you, with what has been given to you. Otherwise, your wandering appetite will never be satisfied.

In the last paragraph in our passage, we are reminded once again of our finitude. This is summed up in verse 12: “For who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain life, which he passes like a shadow.” The Preacher is saying that our vision is limited. We do not even know what is good for us as we live out the few days of our vain lives. We do not know what we truly need. This is why it is necessary for us to learn to accept things as they come to us. And this even includes learning to accept the things that we are not able to change about ourselves. This is not to say that we should ever stop resisting sin. That is a battle that we are called to keep on fighting our whole

life long. Rather, it is to say that we cannot expect to get ourselves all straightened out in this life. The words of a wise old pastor named William Still are very insightful on this, as he writes,

“In some ways...I...have no hope of ever sorting myself out. Indeed, my salvation is to live with my oddities and partly put up with them, not to say help other people to put up with them, and partly to rise above them to show that grace is better employed in wrestling resignedly, realistically, cheerfully with our problems than demanding from God heavenly solutions on earth.” [*The Work of the Pastor*, 39]

The Bible’s call to contentment is a call for us to realize that there are many things in this life, many things in our own lives, that will not be straightened out until the Lord returns.

It would be easy for us to read a passage like this and think that it only applies to other people. After all, few, if any, of us are what would be considered “wealthy” by our culture’s standards. We might be able to see how the Preacher’s words apply to CEOs and movie stars and real estate moguls and technology gurus. But what does his warning about the emptiness of riches have to do with us? Well, one thing that we have to remember is that it is not riches in and of themselves that are the problem for the Preacher. In fact, he even goes so far as to say that if God has given you wealth and possessions and the power to enjoy them, then you should enjoy them. I came across the

same idea this week as I was reading the new biography of John Calvin by Bruce Gordon, professor of church history at Yale Divinity School (a book, I might add, that is destined to become the definitive life of Calvin). Gordon contends that it is a gross mischaracterization to think of Calvin as a killjoy, a man who had no time for the pleasures of this life. It is true that he was a man of rigorous personal discipline, but he also believed, in Gordon's words, that

“The fine things of life point to a gracious God. Through the eyes of faith the elect enjoy these things not as momentary pleasures but as the revelation of God's love. The Christian life is not just about suffering...The wonders of creation and the joys of life, when viewed through the lens of faith, sustain and nourish the pilgrim along the journey.” [*Calvin*, 147]

We should enjoy the good things in life as a gift from God. Clearly, then, the problem that the Preacher is talking about here is not wealth itself. Instead, it is the kind of life that is epitomized by the never-ending pursuit of riches. Anyone can fall prey to the temptation to spend his life in the restless pursuit of something that he does not have. How easily we come to think that we need something else, something other than what we have right now, in order to be truly happy. If we could only have whatever it is that we lack, then we would be satisfied. But the sad fact about people who approach life in this way is that they are never going to be satisfied, not even when they obtain the things that

they want. No sooner do they lay their hands upon the object of their desire than they find themselves longing for something else. True contentment is indeed a “rare jewel,” as Jeremiah Burroughs pointed out in his classic book on the subject.

This passage helps us to understand why we find it so difficult to find satisfaction in this life. It shows us that this world is not meant to provide us with lasting satisfaction. And for this reason, we should not feel that we are not getting what is entitled to us when life disappoints us. There is a sense in which it is supposed to disappoint us. And this itself is a great mercy. In the words of commentator Derek Kidner, it is not that

“man has rights which God ignores; it is rather that man has needs which God exposes...The world itself is made to say to us, in the only language we will mostly listen to, ‘This is no place to rest.’” [*The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 60]

We all have within us a longing for security, a yearning for stability, a desire for rest. But there is nothing in this world that is able to satisfy that longing. Life is too uncertain, too disappointing, too much beyond our control. Here again is Samuel Rutherford:

“I know that all created power should sink under me if I should lean down upon it, and therefore it is better to rest on God than sink or fall; and we weak souls must have a bottom and being-place, for we cannot stand out alone. Let us then

be wise in our choice and choose and wail our own blessedness, which is to trust
in the Lord.” [*The Loveliness of Christ*, 6]

The one thing that we all need in this unstable life is a footing. We need someplace solid
to stand in this world of vanity. And the only footing that is solid enough to support us is
the Lord Jesus Christ. As we sing,

On Christ the solid rock I stand;
All other ground is sinking sand,
All other ground is sinking sand.