

Notes for Lesson 9 “How Can Ecclesiastes Teach Contentment?” Part 2

Open with Psalm 37 as an example of a “wisdom” Psalm.

Part 1 was a look at what we should NOT do. (Don’t chase the bubble.) **Part 2 will be a look at what we should do.**

Review - what is vanity? It is pictured as chasing after the wind and to attempt to catch and grasp it in your hand. How impossible! Comment on the “housing bubble.”

1 Samuel 12:20-24 - “Serve the LORD with all your heart. And do not turn aside after empty things that cannot profit or deliver, for they are empty... I will instruct you in the good and the right way. Only fear the Lord and serve Him with all your heart.”

First Point Tonight: Not only the pursuit of riches is vain, but also the pursuit of power.

All false doctrine is vanity.

Explain Luther’s Theology of the Cross vs. the Theology of Glory

Vain speculations and old wives tales, will-worship

(Eccl. 3:16-17) It is necessary to wait for God’s expression of justice - His divine rulings and legal administrations. Study the verses about justice and government, oppressed and oppressors, with the theme of “power”. In other words, not only material riches, but also worldly power is fleeting and vaporous.

What happens when the most sought after commodity of life is not money, but power?

The dynamics of power are also inscrutable. Why do some reign and others do not? Many times the rulers are incompetent, proud, foolish, selfish tyrants. Why do honorable men walk in rags while fools ride on horseback? There are froward, unreasonable masters to obey. Wisdom is stronger than military might, no matter who will remember later.

(4:1-3) “Again, I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun: I saw the tears of the oppressed - and they have no comforter; power was on the side of their oppressors - and they have no comforter. And I declared that the dead, who had already died, are happier than the living, who are still alive. But better than both is he who has not yet been, who has not seen the evil that is done under the sun.”

(4:13ff) Better a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king who no longer knows how to heed a warning. The youth may have come from prison to the kingship, or he may have been born in poverty within his kingdom. I saw that all who lived and walked under the sun followed the youth, the king’s successor. There was no end to all the people who were before them. But those who came later were not pleased with the successor. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

(5:8-9) If you see the poor oppressed in a district, and justice and rights denied, do not be surprised at such things; for one official is eyed by a higher one, and over them both are others higher still. The increase from the land is taken by all; the king himself profits from the fields.

(9:15-18) I also saw under the sun this example of wisdom that greatly impressed me: There was once a small city with only a few people in it. And a powerful king came against it, surrounded it and built huge siege works against it. Now there lived in that city a man poor but wise, and he saved the city by his wisdom. But nobody remembered that poor man. So I said,

“Wisdom is better than strength.” But the poor man’s wisdom is despised, and his words are no longer heeded. The quiet words of the wise are more to be heeded than the shouts of a ruler of fools. Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good.

(10:4-7) If a ruler’s anger rises against you, do not leave your post; calmness can lay great offenses to rest. There is an evil I have seen under the sun, the sort of error that arises from a ruler: Fools are put in many high positions, while the rich occupy the low ones. I have seen slaves on horseback, while princes go on foot like slaves.

(10:16-17) Woe to the land whose king was a servant and whose princes feast in the morning. Blessed is the land whose king is of noble birth and whose princes eat at a proper time— for strength and not for drunkenness.

The pursuit of power is an empty, futile, bubble that will not satisfy the human soul.

Second Point: God not only gives good things, He must give the power to enjoy them.

Eccl. 6:1-6 A great cause of discontent: God gives wealth, possessions and honor, but does not give the ability to enjoy it! What futility is that! Edwards: God frequently gives great wealth to people He hates. This shows God’s disdain for worldly riches. Doug Wilson: like having a cupboard stocked with cans of peaches but having no can opener. Why would one covet things that are given to the reprobate? How we have succumbed to the lies and deception!

Third Point: It can be really depressing to realize that the things I have been desiring are like bubbles that dissolve into nothing, and the goals I have been setting are on dead-end streets. So then, what should I be doing that is at all worthwhile? Is there nothing to grasp after, no hope of happiness in this vain world? One of the reasons that I love so much the movie, “Chariots of Fire”...

God does commend some activities of eternal worth. These pursuits, then, cannot, be vain.

Wisdom schools us not only that the world ‘under the sun’ is full of disappointment and despair when we try to find our satisfaction in things that CANNOT and were never meant to satisfy our souls, but it also teaches us that there ARE some things in this life that we should find satisfaction and happiness in. It is proper even to pursue them in light of the eternal world that is still yet to come.

Here are seven “contentment-can-be-realized” verses as The Great Gift of God! Had an old, repentant, wisened Solomon had learned the “secret of contentment”? It seems probable. Having tasted the bitterness of failing in the pursuit of contentment, he changed his ways and communicates to us a lesson. **Pursue non-vanity!**

1. Eccl. 2:24ff “A man can do *nothing better* than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without Him who can eat or find enjoyment? To the man who pleases Him, **God gives** wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to the sinner **He gives** the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.”

“Toward the end of February 1525, Luther had again resumed his task as professor... From July 30 to November 7, 1526, he lectured on Ecclesiastes. He found that this work was so

difficult for him that at a certain point, he didn't want to continue. On September 5 he quit, but he continued again on September 25, because he realized it had to be finished." (Martin Luther, A Spiritual Biography, Herman Selderhuis, page 231)

"This is the principal conclusion, in fact the point, of the whole book, which he will often repeat. This is a remarkable passage, one that explains everything preceding and following it. This is how it agrees with the preceding: Those pleasures are to be condemned which we by our own counsels seek to achieve for the future, and those labors are to be condemned which we strive to carry out by our own counsels. But those pleasures and labors which God gives are good, and they are to be used for the present without anxiety about either future afflictions, or future pleasures. But who is capable of such things? It is rightly said, but what is wisely set forth does not happen. Indeed, hearing we do not hear and seeing we do not see, and no one follows it. We are immersed in striving and anxiety about planning and carrying out our affairs. The heart is averse to plans, and every day it becomes more irritated and restless. Those who are pious refrain from anxiety; the rest of the human race have a restless life until they die. Therefore he says, 'This also, I saw, is from the hand of God.'" (Vol 15, page 47)

2. Eccl. 3:12ff "I know that there is *nothing better* for men than to be happy and do good while they live. That everyone may eat and drink and find satisfaction in all his toil - **this is the gift of God**. I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that men will revere Him."

3. Eccl. 3:22ff "So I saw that there is *nothing better* for a man than to enjoy his work, because that is his lot. For who can bring him to see what will happen after him?"

4. Eccl. 5:18ff "Then I realized that it is good and proper for a man to eat and drink, and to find satisfaction in his toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given him - for this is his lot. Moreover, when **God gives** any man wealth and possessions, and **enables him to enjoy them**, to accept his lot and **be happy** in his work - **this is a gift of God**. He seldom reflects on the days of his life, because God keeps him occupied with **gladness** of heart."

Hear Luther again: "This statement is the interpreter of the entire book: Solomon intends to forbid vain anxieties, so that we may happily enjoy the things that are present and not care at all about the things that are in the future, lest we permit the present moment, our moment, to slip away." (Page 93)

"Worry is assuming responsibilities God never intended me to carry." In Solomon's terms it is realizing that I cannot make straight what God has made crooked.

5. Eccl. 8:15ff "So I commend the enjoyment of life because nothing is better for a man under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad. Then joy will accompany him in his work all the days of the life **God has given him** under the sun."

6. Eccl. 9:7ff "Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for it is now that **God favors** what you do. Always be clothed in white, and always anoint your head with oil. **Enjoy life** with your wife who you love, all the days of this meaningless life that **God has given you** under the sun - all your meaningless days. For this is your lot in life and in your toilsome labor under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the grave, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom."

“As long as we are obliged to live in the midst of such perversity, it is best for us to be happy and relaxed... This is the height of spiritual wisdom, to know that one has a gracious God, who approves our works and actions... (Romans 8:16) You cannot mock the world more effectively than by laughing when it grows angry. Let it be enough for you that you have a gracious God. For what is the malice of the world in comparison with the sweetness of God?” (Luther)

7. Eccl. 11:9ff “Be happy, young man, while you are young, and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see, but know that for all these things God will bring you to judgment. So then, banish anxiety from your heart and cast off the troubles of your body for youth and vigor are meaningless. Remember your Creator...”

Solomon wisely instructs us about how to live a happy, contented life, but he also counsels that we cannot do it without the enabling grace of God. It is His to grant the power to live without the anxiety and vexation. This would be impossible apart from the gift of God.

Final lesson: **Contentment allows us to enjoy life under the sun in a world of vanity. Accept life the way it is in this fallen world. It is far from perfect, but God still gives enjoyment. And never forget, there is yet an eternal world to which all are proceeding.**

Note that the summary, the end, the conclusion and reason for the book of Ecclesiastes is not “that you learn to be content,” but that you might learn to fear the LORD and to keep His commandments in view of the fact that He will judge you for every deed and every hidden thought and attitude.

Confirm with this Proverb: 23:17 — “Do not let your heart envy sinners, but be zealous for the fear of the LORD all the day. For surely there is a hereafter and your hope will not be cut off.” (How does the fear of the LORD excise envy from the heart?” Then be zealous for it!)

Here is the summary of the matter:

“The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.” Combine that summary with “the chief end of man”. “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever.” Should we fear God and keep His commandments or glorify God and enjoy Him forever? There is no contradiction, for they are describing the same truth. Those who fear God glorify Him, as they sing the song of the victorious Lamb in Revelation 15:4: “Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify Your name?” (See Michael Reeves, Rejoice and Tremble, page 62)